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**TALKING *TORCHWOOD*:  
FLUID SEXUALITY, REPRESENTATION AND AUDIENCES**

**Submitted by Craig Haslop**

**For completion of the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy in Media and Cultural  
Studies**

**School of Media, Film and Music**

**University of Sussex**

**July 2012**

**DECLARATION**

In accordance with the regulations of the University of Sussex, I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signed.....

July 2012

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**TALKING *TORCHWOOD*: FLUID SEXUALITY, REPRESENTATION AND AUDIENCES**

**SUMMARY**

Queer theorists have argued that we should move beyond sexual labelling in the social sense. For this thesis I have conducted audience research to explore the liberatory potential of the representation of fluid sexuality in the BBC television series *Torchwood* (2006-) through my own and my participants' interpretations. I evaluate how *Torchwood* can be seen as potentially liberating in terms of sexual identity and what the implications might be for wider debates around fluid versus stable gendered sexual identities in queer politics. I suggest *Torchwood* should be seen as liberatory in the sense that it challenges rigid notions of sexual identity in the first two seasons of the series. However through the analysis, I argue that in two important ways we cannot suggest that the series is challenging heteronormativity, as some academics have proposed. Firstly, as part of the process of channel hopping from niche to mainstream television, the liberatory sexual agenda is watered down. Secondly, through readings of the series from the perspective of gender I suggest that the portrayal of masculinity in particular is heteronormative. In terms of my participants, I also note the tension that exists between their aspirations for fluid sexuality, exercised through their readings of *Torchwood* and the need for stability of identity, also notable when analysing their responses. In this way, I suggest that in terms of the period now often termed the 'post-gay', perhaps we need a more fluid approach to identity, where we aspire to a fluid notion of gendered sexual identities, but keep in mind the need for stability as part of that process.

## INTRODUCTION

**Gwen:** 'You don't know anything?' (*about Captain Jack Harkness*)

**Owen:** 'Not who he is, not where he's from. Nothing, except him being gay'

**Gwen:** 'No, he's not. Really, do you think?'

**Tosh:** 'No. Owen does. I don't.'

**Ianto:** 'And I don't care.'

**Owen:** 'Period military is not the dress code of a straight man.'

**Gwen:** 'I think it suits him. Sort of classic.'

**Tosh:** 'Exactly! I've watched him in action. He'll shag anything if it's gorgeous enough.'

*Torchwood (2006-), Episode 1, Season One, Everything Changes*

**Tosh:** 'So. I'm shagging a woman and an alien.'

**Mary:** 'Which is worse?'

**Tosh:** 'Well I know which one my parents would say.'

*Torchwood, Episode 7, Season One, Greeks Bearing Gifts*

**Captain John Hart:** 'I think I'm starting to see what he (*referring to Jack Harkness*) likes about this place. She's beautiful. He's stunning. '

**Gwen:** 'Don't you ever stop?'

**Captain John Hart:** 'What? Five minutes to live you want me to behave? Oh that's gorgeous.'

**Gwen:** 'That's a poodle.'

*Torchwood, Episode 2, Season Two, Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang*

*Torchwood* is a BBC TV spin-off from the recently revitalised *Dr Who* (2005- ). Before its launch many of the media reviews or teasers for the series carried titillating headlines about its content: the series would be 'Hot Stuff'<sup>1</sup> and a raunchy 'spin-off'<sup>2</sup> that would

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<sup>1</sup> <http://akastg.mirror.co.uk/3am/tv-film-news/torchwood-to-be-hot-stuff-646243>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/tv/64139/Dr-Ooh-gets-four-gay-pals.html>

see the *Dr Who* star John Barrowman get 'four bisexual assistants'<sup>3</sup>. This media discourse seemed to be at least partly fuelled also by the cast with John Barrowman commenting that we would 'see some sexy s\*\*t'<sup>4</sup>. Indeed as the quotes above highlight the series has never shied away from explicit depictions of queer sex with all the core characters having an ostensibly homosexual experience in the first season. The series follows the story of Captain Jack Harkness, a time traveller introduced in the first season of the revitalised *Dr Who*, in the episode 'Empty Child'. In *Torchwood* we discover that Captain Jack, now immortal, has been flung back in time and has been living on earth for centuries, helping to lead a new Government agency set up by Queen Victoria to investigate alien encounters following her encounter with the Doctor. In the first two seasons he leads a team of five (which later dwindles to three, in season three, then two in the final season with the addition of several US cast members). The series is set on present day earth investigating alien visitations. In this way, the series continues the science fiction tropes of *Dr Who* but Earth bound and is spliced with generic conventions of recent police dramas such as the *CSI* franchise (2000-). Moreover, the series has taken advantage of its mostly post watershed scheduling by including adult themes of sex, violence and gore. It was launched to a relatively warm welcome by the UK tabloid media considering its explicit content and overt representation of alternative sexualities.

Despite the content of the series it carried a number of ratings accolades including the highest ratings of any non-sport show on a digital channel for its opening episode on BBC3 in 2006<sup>5</sup>. This was followed by the achievement of raising the series ratings from around the two million mark in season two on BBC2 to the six million mark in season three on BBC1<sup>6</sup>. Russell T. Davies creator, executive producer and writer launched the series to the media with the following statement:

'Without making it political, or dull, this is going to be a very bisexual programme. I want to knock down the barriers so we can't define which of the

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/tv/64139/Dr-Ooh-gets-four-gay-pals.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/tv/64139/Dr-Ooh-gets-four-gay-pals.html> - accessed 13/7/12.

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6077078.stm> - accessed 13/7/12.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/ratings/torchwood-hits-new-heights/5003460.article> - accessed 13/7/12.

characters is gay. We need to start mixing things up rather than thinking “this is a gay character and he’ll only ever go with men”.”<sup>7</sup>

While British TV screens have become more and more overtly queer in some genres over the last twenty years, the representations of queer lifestyles have often been reductive, in the sense that they are usually of self-identified gay women and men. As Davis and Needham (2009) highlight in the introduction to one of the few recent overviews of ‘Queer TV’, all too often representation of queer men and women in British drama and soap has been through the prism of the coming out story, and in that sense highlighting the ‘identity’ aspect of sexuality. Bisexuality as an identity or as a more fluid form of unlabelled sexuality is rarely represented on our screens; indeed it is possible to name most of the key British TV texts with these forms of sexuality in the last 20 years including *This Life* (1996-1997), *Metrosexuality* (1999) *Coupling* (2000-2004) and *Hollyoaks in the City* (2006). With the rise of queer theory and politics and the subsequent questioning of the need for ‘gay’ social identities, academics (Sinfield, 1998; Aaron, 2004 and Davis and Needham 2009) have argued that we are moving past sexual ‘identity’ politics and there is potential that *Torchwood* is a TV series that can be seen to embody this and be liberatory in that context. Given this, a series such as *Torchwood* which was launched with bold intentions around sexuality such as those Russell T. Davies mentions and went on to become a ratings success, is significant for queer media and cultural studies. Indeed given the aspirations of the queer movement to move away from fixed notions of sexual identity, how viewers identify, relate to, and articulate the depiction of fluid sexuality in a relatively successful TV text such as *Torchwood*, becomes an important question in the audience study of sexual representation.

This leads me to the broad question that drives this thesis, asking through my own textual analysis and audience research to what extent Russell T. Davies and the BBC production team achieved the goal of ‘mixing it up’ in sexual representation terms across the four seasons of the series so far? How do my research respondents interpret the representation of sexuality in the series? What discourses are and are not available to them around fluid sexuality and sexual identity? If we say that gender

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Russell T. Davies in October 2006 edition of *Gay times* (pp. 337).

is inextricably linked to sexuality then how is it implicated in the representation of fluid sexuality? Indeed if we say that *Torchwood* has even made a small step forward in terms of liberatory representation of sexuality on TV then where does it fit in the canon of queer TV, science fiction and crime drama that has come before it?

While there is an emerging body of work relating to *Torchwood*, which in itself highlights its significance as an important TV text, in terms of sexual representation the majority of work so far has offered a positive analysis of the series (Ireland, 2010; Medhurst, 2009; Davies and Needham, 2009). In this thesis through detailed interpretation of audience responses and my own textual analysis I analyse one episode in particular and through my own knowledge of the full four seasons place that into the context of the whole series. I conduct a close investigation of the text through a number of elements including the relations of gender to sexuality, the impact of changing dynamics of genre across the life of the series and by considering my participants' own sexual gendered identities through their interpretations. In doing so I argue that while the series might be a step away from reductive notions of sexual identity, offering a more taken for granted and fluid approach to sexuality, when we consider the development of the series and the role of gender in sexual representation, the series is not as liberatory as many have suggested. In addition by considering my participants views on fluid sexuality and the way they perform and (re)form their gendered sexual identities through their interpretations of the series, I argue that in the case of my participants, there is a tension between aspiration for sexual fluidity and desire for some safety and stability through identity. In this way, I question academics in media and cultural studies that have started to reduce identity to a process (Gauntlett, 2002). I go on to suggest through my audience responses that we need to be mindful to account for the history of identity making and past encounters with discourses that might still impact on the current process.

In this introduction I set out my purpose and rationale for audience research around *Torchwood*, both touching on where this project fits in relation to previous work but also setting out the need for my specific approach. Sexuality is an under-represented element of audience studies both in terms of the existing work around *Torchwood* and more broadly in relation to sexual representation in the media. I review the work

which does exist and then consider debates around queer theory, identity and postmodernism to highlight how this thesis can add to and expand upon existing research. How does this project fit with existing work in terms of *Torchwood*, sexual representation on British TV and debates around the potential of fluid sexual identities in terms of queer theory and politics? In this chapter I suggest that some of the reservations of queer media researchers about audience research in terms of empiricism are holding them back from addressing key questions that are being debated about the potential of more fluid notions of sexuality and sexual identity. I aim in this thesis to articulate and conduct an audience research method and approach that can start to consider some of these issues, but remain critical in the queer media and cultural studies tradition.

### ***Torchwood* and the audience**

There is already a considerable amount of academic writings on *Torchwood* which are related to this thesis. These include including the marketing of the series and its use of 'branding' (Hills, 2010); its links to *Dr Who* (Ireland, 2010); representation of masculinities through fashion (Gilligan, 2010); the role of intratextual celebrity in terms of John Barrowman (Williams, 2011); and, perhaps most relevant to this research, its representation of sexuality (Medhurst, 2009; Ireland, 2010; Barron, 2010 and Amy Chinn, 2012). Most academics have celebrated the more liberal and fluid depiction of sexuality in the series. Davis and Needham (2009) applaud its refreshing approach and Medhurst (2009) refers to the show as a 'post queer, pansexual perv fest' (80). In most of the existing writing on *Torchwood*, however, the audience (that is empirical analysis of their consumption and interpretation of the text) is missing. In my search I found one exception which is Ginn's (2010) work on sexuality in *Torchwood*. She wanted to determine what the reaction of the audience would be to *Torchwood's* overt representation of homosexuality, conducting questionnaire research following a screening of the first episode of season two. Overall she found that students were not as hostile to the frank depiction of homosexuality as she expected. Ginn's work, however, focused on the representation of gay men kissing rather than the more broad depiction of bisexuality or fluid sexuality in the series. Moreover, her research was conducted within the boundaries of her university, thus restricting the diversity of

the people involved. With Ginn's work being in the minority in terms of audience research around sexuality and *Torchwood*, in this thesis I build on her initial findings in this area but with a wider focus in terms of how the audience interprets fluid sexual representation through qualitative methodology. In this way, then, my research is partly driven by the need to develop an under-researched aspect of the *Torchwood* text itself in relation to sexuality. However, *Torchwood* is not the only TV text with bisexual representation where a focus on media consumption is missing from the analysis. I turn now to the wider area of the study of bisexuality and audience research to consider the small amount of work that does exist and to suggest why the nature of bisexuality itself and the beliefs that circulate around it contribute to its under-representation in the field.

### **Bisexuality and audience research**

While audience work on the bisexuality or fluid sexuality of *Torchwood* is virtually non-existent, this is a trend that can be seen right across film and media studies. Austin's (1999) work on the film *Basic Instinct* (1992) is an exception. The film follows the story of Catherine Tramell, a novelist suspected of murder having an on-screen lesbian relationship but also having sex with the lead investigator in the film played by Michael Douglas. Austin notes of the film that it was reported as a 'celebration of womanhood' (1999: 50), as well as 'a psychological film' and 'an erotic thriller'. He highlights the way it was designed to appeal to many audiences through its generic hybridism i.e. a thriller which was somehow erotic to straight men but also empowering to women. Austin also set out to also investigate the reaction amongst gay and lesbian viewers / audiences to the film's apparent lack of regard for sexual politics. Some activist groups suggested that certain scenes of lesbianism were not representative of homosexual women and indeed were in fact designed for the pleasure of heterosexual men. Unfortunately, Austin did not receive enough responses from the gay community to include these results in his finished research. However, when considering the wider topic of sexual identity in relation to straight and gay female responses his findings have some interesting implications for this thesis. Firstly he notes that the film helps some women acquire a degree of sexual liberation – both bisexual and straight women responded favourably to the film's depiction of bisexuality helping convince one



woman that it was good enough 'to try' (Austin 2002: 71). He finds in his research that not only can a text be liberating, but that sexual identity itself can be (re) imagined or (re) affirmed through a text offering potential identity change/affirmation as part of media consumption. This is further exemplified through Austin's teenage heterosexual male respondents who wanted to be 'seen' to see the film due to its explicit reputation. As Austin notes, 'the consumption of sexualised images of women not only produces private pleasures, but is also part of an attempted public articulation of an 'adult' heterosexual male identity'(1999: p154). In this way, the teenage boys are using the media text as part of a gender performance and as part of their identity (re) formation.

I build on Austin's work in this thesis in two ways. Firstly, in chapter three I consider the representation of bisexual and fluid sexuality in *Torchwood* through textual analysis and audience interpretations in terms of how liberating (or not) the depictions are for my participants. Then, in chapter six I explore the role of *Torchwood* as a part of identity (re)formation, to determine how media texts can be part of identity as a process but also in relation to the performance of those gendered sexual identities. While audience studies has neglected bisexuality and has little to say about fluid sexuality, possibly in relation to the fields' neglect of sexuality as a whole, it is also potentially related to the lack of representations of bisexuality on UK TV screens, a point which has been noted in the academic research which I review next.

### **Bisexual representation: everything and nothing**

When we do start asking questions about quantity and quality of bisexual representation, the analysis does not make for comfortable reading. Academics such as Davison and Allen (1992) under the auspices of the BI Academic Intervention have considered bisexual representation. In their volume '*The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity and Desire*' they note themselves that many of the representations they, and their colleagues, have included are in fact from lesbian texts including coming out film fiction such as *The Hunger* (1983) or non- (self-identified) bisexual icons which the bi community have garnered for themselves such as Madonna. This at least partly demonstrates that there has been a void in terms of representations available to those defining themselves as bisexual.

It is not, however, only the lack of representation(s) which has made bisexuality less visible, there is also a reluctance to acknowledge the existence of bisexuality in society. As Barker et al note (2008) in their review of bisexuality in the British media, this is the case with the character of 'Bob' in Russell T. Davies' BBC series *Bob and Rose* (2001) who was portrayed as not wanting to see himself as bisexual but as a gay man in love with a woman. While this does offer liberatory potential from being 'positioned' as bisexual and labelled in that sense, it still also resists using that label. Barker et al also highlight that the British news media often elides bisexuality. They draw our attention to the way the British press positioned *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as a 'gay cowboy' film – whereas both the leading protagonists do indeed continue to have heterosexual relationships alongside their own gay love affair. In practice these two characters are bisexual but not once is this referred to in British media coverage of the film. In this way, bisexuality is often either non-existent or ignored.

Even when bisexuality does begin to appear on our screens, the representations on offer are reduced to stereotypes by the media. Bisexual characters are often depicted as 'mad or bad'. Barker et al (2008) note the rare inclusion of a bisexual character Jane in the BBC2 series *Coupling*, but that she was portrayed as mentally unstable. In another rare inclusion of an openly bisexual character, Burton Phillips in Channel Four's *Hollyoaks in the City* played a bisexual 'bad boy': a club owner who was involved in criminal activity and shown in kinky sexual scenarios which were depicted as bizarre by making them seem comedic through the use of playful non-diegetic music.

In this way, in terms of representational politics, bisexuality is arguably in a similar position to that which debates around gay depictions found themselves in the 1990s. There is a need for more representation, but also a balance to be found where bisexuality should not be reduced to a narrow idea of what it is. Indeed as Du Plessis highlights, perhaps one of the difficulties in representational debates around bisexuality is the nature of bisexuality itself. It is often a 'non-identity', hidden through the pressures of heterosexuality. The pressures of institutions such as Christian marriage which prescribes that a marriage is a relationship between a man and a

woman, as well as the indirect effect of the taboo of non-monogamous relationships<sup>8</sup> are just two of the influences preventing bisexual men and women from being more open. Therefore those who are bisexual and want to exist in a heterosexual relationship are more likely to have to hide their bisexuality. In this way, it is both an important element of sexuality to analyse, as it traverses the sexual spectrum crossing heterosexual and gender boundaries and binaries, but also a political identity which is often less likely to be visible. It sometimes is associated with a 'bisexual' identity, but even then it is a challenging form of social identity in the way that it is able to operate in the wider cultural sphere of heterosexuality but also the queer/gay sub-culture (although these spheres interconnect/overlap). While this cross sub-cultural access offers many interesting possibilities in terms of analysis and politics, as Hemmings has noted in her work on bisexuality the bisexual has often been seen as a 'revolutionary double agent' (2002). This arguably is one reason why bisexuality or fluid sexuality is still the most oppressed of sexualities, despite the wider queer liberation process of recent years. Bisexuality is often subject to a double oppression. In many cases those in wider heterosexual culture, and in gay sub-culture, feel that the bisexual is having their sexual cake and eating it. This is raised by Hemmings where she paraphrases a gay view of bisexuality: 'I'd never sleep with a bisexual because they bring men into the lesbian community/are responsible for the spread of HIV/always leave you for someone of the opposite sex/same sex/can't be trusted etc' (1993: 130). In this way, then, the representation of bisexuality itself is an important factor for analysis in this thesis. Indeed it leads to an important question for this thesis: what is being represented in *Torchwood*? Is it bisexuality or an even more open ended version of sexuality, one less associated with a socially constructed form of sexual identity? In chapter three I consider how the latest versions of bisexuality as shown in *Torchwood* fit into debates around bisexual depictions and whether the focus away from social identity which *Torchwood* ostensibly represents, is not just a representation of fluid sexuality but could also be seen as a liberation from social sexual identities more widely. In chapter four I consider more specifically how the representation of

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<sup>8</sup> Although of course bisexuality does not automatically suggest the need to have sex with both sexes constantly one of the cultural antecedents of being an open bisexual is a wider cultural belief that you would need sex with both sexes even when in a relationship.

bisexuality and issues of gender intersect, for bisexuality is a sexual relation that works within and across gender boundaries.

While elements of bisexuality and bisexual identity have limited its representation, and indeed the 'priority' that has been placed in queer politics for liberation around gay representation, it is not just bisexuality which is under-represented in audience studies but sexuality more broadly. Inevitably this thesis intersects with debates around audience work on the representation of sexuality, therefore I want to address the existing research in this area and in doing so highlight how my thesis adds to debates in this field and potentially challenges some of the reservations of queer media academics more broadly vis-à-vis audience research.

### **Sexuality and audience studies**

Surprisingly, despite the rise of gay and lesbian studies and later queer theory, within audience studies the subject of sexual identity and sexuality both in terms the audience's own identity/sexuality and how they relate to identities/sexualities figured in the text, has rarely been addressed. There are a few exceptions which are worth reviewing here. Jenkins (1995) considers the plight of *Star Trek* (1966-1969) fans and their fight for queer character inclusion in the show. Through focus groups and analysis of both fan letters and producers responses he takes an 'interventionist' position as both a fan and an academic to legitimise the fan's right to fight for queer representation. However this focuses on fans and their re-appropriation of a text rather than a text with overtly queer content. Studies by Hallam and Marshment (1995), Gauntlet and Hill (1999), and Thomas (2002) all explore the audience's experiences of (homo) sexuality and sexual identity on TV. A number of studies have attempted to focus on the sexual identities of the audience in relation to a text including Hemphill's (1995) work on gay black men's views about the US TV series '*In Living Colour*'; Austin's (1999) work on the sexuality of teenage boys in relation to the film *Basic Instinct* (1992). These two studies are rare examples of audience work which relates the sexual identities of the audience to the sexual identities represented in the text. Even with these studies in mind, the amount of work which systematically addresses sexuality and sexual identity as part of the text or the audience is minimal.

A search shows there have been around 18 significant audience studies<sup>9</sup> from a cultural studies perspective since the new audience research field emerged in the early 1980s, and yet only the two studies I have just mentioned try to include the voices of the queer community. This lack of interest in sexuality in audience studies can be partly traced back to its development in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies with its original focus on gender and class (Seiter, 1999). However, despite the rise of queer theory with its urgent questions regarding the necessity of identity politics and therefore interest in 'identity' representation, there has not been an influx of queer interest in the audience. This, I suggest, is partly related to queer theory's theoretical underpinnings. I now want to consider some of the questions queer theory raised regarding identity, to highlight that within its own make-up are important questions which can be thought about through audience research.

### **Queer(y)ing Theory**

Lesbian and gay media studies, if such a field in itself exists anymore, has been resisting, reacting to, and changing as a result of the birth of queer theory. On the whole, proponents of queer theory, mostly drawing on the poststructuralist theorist Foucault, have suggested that gay (homosexual) identity is socially constructed and exists due to legal/medical discourses from the last two centuries<sup>10</sup>. Queer theory argues that previous to this homosexuality as a construct did not exist and in this way many queer theorists (Butler, 1990<sup>11</sup>; Dollimore, 1996; Fuss, 1996; and Eng et al, 2005) argue that it does not need to exist now. It also follows Derrida's (1976) notion of 'supplementarity' which suggests 'meanings are organised through difference' (Namaste in Seidman, 1995: 196). In other words, a focus on difference, the hetero/homosexual binary, will only highlight it further. As Seidman notes in his analysis, 'queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a

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<sup>9</sup> Although I would not claim this list to be exhaustive it does consist of the most often cited publications and is partially derived from Morley's own overview of audience research written for the Museum of Broadcast Communications see:

<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/A/htmlA/audiencerease/audiencerease.htm> - accessed 7/3/2012

<sup>10</sup> It should be made clear at this stage, as Seidman (op cit) also notes, that queer theorists can not be seen as a unified whole all agreeing consistently on the intricacies of sexual theory, but there are broad similarities in thinking which I try to summarise here.

<sup>11</sup> Although Butler later highlights that there is a need for queer political identity and terms herself as a lesbian.

homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviours and social relations – in a word, the constitution of society and the self' (1995: 128). Given queer theory's interest in the social relations of desire as a structuring factor, one would think that sociologically-oriented studies such as audience research would be important. However, other elements of the epistemological foundations of queer theory make empirical research less palatable for many queer academics, paradoxically reducing interest in the 'sociological' elements of desire.

This has not gone unnoticed by a number of academics (Edwards, 1998; Morton, 1996) who have argued that queer theory needs to move beyond the theoretical. Edwards, for example, suggests that the foundations of queer theory and some of its assertions such as moving beyond 'gay' identity are not grounded in any kind of sociological inquiry. Gauntlett (2002) reviews Edwards' critique of queer theory and breaks it down into a number of components. He agrees with Edwards' points about lack of empirical data in queer theory but notes that he does not believe that queer theorists, such as Butler, need to have an empirical underpinning to their work. He suggests that psychoanalysis and deconstruction does not have to be based in the empirical. I would like to take a slightly different position to both Edwards' and Gauntlett's arguments. I would suggest that Edwards' identification of a 'missing' sociological link in queer theory is an insightful one and one, which given the fashionability of queer theory in academic circles and the strong distrust of any kind of empiricism amongst post-structuralist scholars, is a brave remark. But, I also agree with Gauntlett in the sense that Butler's theories are indeed powerful. Butler's ideas around gender and sex identity with their Foucaultian underpinnings have at least partly enabled those in gay and lesbian studies to see identity differently through queer theory; to question the reductivity and divisiveness of an over-essentialist trajectory. My point, leading from this, is that Butler's ability to shine light on these possibilities could, and should, only be strengthened by following Edwards' call for some sociological empirical work which maintains a critical standpoint in the best traditions of cultural studies. Indeed, in other areas of study such as feminism and gender studies, empirical approaches using audience research are well established and have already made a substantial

contribution to our thinking around encounters with TV (and other) texts. I want to consider one of the most famous pieces of feminist audience research next to highlight how this type of research can inform queer studies.

### **Audience Studies, identity and feminism**

In one of the most significant pieces of audience research, Radway (1984) opens up the world of the romantic novel and its readers. She does not position the readers of romance novels in terms of sexual identity, but rather as women reading novels. However, I would argue that she is looking at how gendered sexual identity (re)forms through encounters with mass market romantic novels which usually incorporate a limited view of romantic love. She does so through a mixture of her own critical textual analysis, wider political economic reviews of the romance printing industry and audience research. Her reasons for doing this type of mixed methodology, I would suggest, are well captured by a passage from Radway's concluding section, where she is reviewing her journey through the different elements of understanding romance reading:

Had I looked solely at the act of reading as it is understood by the women themselves or, alternatively at the covert significance of the romance's narrative structure I might have been able to provide one clear cut, sharp focus image. In the first case, the image would suggest that the act of romance reading is oppositional because it allows women to refuse momentarily their self-abnegating social role. In the second the image would imply that the romance's narrative structure embodies a simple recapitulation and recommendation of patriarchy and its constituent social practices and ideologies...

the multiple perspectives employed here have been adopted, therefore, in the hope that they might help us to comprehend what the women understand themselves to be gaining from the reading of romances while simultaneously revealing how that practice and self-understanding have tacit, unintended effects and implications. (493)

In this way, as Radway highlights, she looked at how the women consumed this text, and what, as psychologists might call them, 'secondary gains' they get from the text in terms of their own lives. In so doing, Radway was able to build an understanding of the use of the text in terms of the identities of the women involved with the romances themselves; to get a 'process' view of the operations of patriarchy, as she saw it. Said in another way – she could look at the 'why' of subscription to patriarchal ideologies of love.

To think about queer theory then in light of Radway's work, I would argue Radway's work asked about the process of gendered sexual identity formation through the romance novel. Queer academics are asking about the potential of label-free identity and how we can help to make change to liberate ourselves from normative notions of alternative sexuality or reproductions of heterosexual norms. Dollimore has suggested that the very concept of identity could potentially be a defence against the 'instability, the difficulty of desire itself' (1996: 528). At the same time there is celebration of 'post-gay' representation but little research into how the depictions are being consumed by audiences and how they might be part of identity (re)formation in those audiences. In the same way as Radway's work interrogates the process of gendered sexual identity (re)formation through romantic novels, audience research that starts to address questions about the potential of liberatory representations in terms of change around sexual identity can get under the skin of current discourses around gendered sexual labelling and identity and help to open up more debate about fluid sexuality in relation to queer theory.

Radway (1994) later reappraises this work and makes an important point which needs to be considered in relation to this thesis. She notes that by the end of her book she had highlighted that the women of Smithton often felt empowered by the romance novel; Radway wanted to reclaim the romance novel for feminism. In doing so, however, her reflexive account of the book notes that in some ways she managed to become the 'knowing' observer. She positions herself alongside Modleski and her work *'Loving with a Vengeance'* (1982) and notes the manner in which they both created a 'utopian' vision of fantasy. That fantasy would and could in the end become reality. As Radway notes it is a utopian idea of utopian fantasies. Because of this,



Radway criticises herself for devaluing fantasy ‘by seeing it only as a symptom of problems in the real world’ (217). In relation to this project it is an important critique to bear in mind, for science fiction which undoubtedly *Torchwood* partly is, is ‘utopian’ (and also often dystopian). In this way, part of the genre itself (and potentially every fiction) is escape. Therefore, in my analysis I try to hold on to the ‘world of fantasy’ that my respondents recreate when discussing *Torchwood*. However, by considering the performance and (re)formation of identities as part of this research I aim to consider where the ‘world of fantasy’ can be seen as well as where it is left behind and to what extent that can read as liberatory. However, I would also like to position myself slightly differently to Radway, in the sense that if we dislocate ourselves totally from ‘knowing’ then we surely abandon part of the critical project itself. Indeed it is questioning, not just examining, elements of culture that is arguably the underpinning of the (British) Cultural Studies tradition. My work follows Radway’s in other important ways too, in particular in relation to her analysis of gender and sexuality as two constructs bound up together, and I want to turn now to consider other feminists who argued for this approach to highlight why it is important in this thesis.

### **Gendered sexuality**

My work follows other important academics that have theorised the relations between sexuality and gender. For example, Butler (1993) contends that the repeat performances of gender are driven by the heterosexual matrix. She suggests that heterosexual sex, the biology of sex, is privileged through the (re)performance of gender where masculine traits denote a man and feminine traits a woman. For queer women, men and transgender and transsexual people these performances are like constant dress rehearsals for the show that might never take place. Nevertheless, gender is re-performed in the queer community seen through the reification of hyper-masculinity in the British gay male scene, the association between ‘camp’, men and effeminacy, the preoccupation of butch-femme in the lesbian scene and the desire for many trans women to ‘pass’ through hyper-femininity. All these boundaries are imperfect but still they coalesce; they still reinforce a false gender binary. In a similar way, Sedgwick (1990) has highlighted the problem of the homo/hetero binary; that this is a false division of sexuality but one that is driven by gender, for it is the

reification of the sexed body binary and the mirage of gender difference that is often used to 'other' homosexuality. For example she specifically considers the etymology of the word homosexual with its male bias and therefore subsequent undertones in relation to naming all queers under the banner of 'men'. Following Butler and Sedgwick, in this project I envisage gender and the sexed body as almost impossible to separate in analytical terms from sexuality. As well as analysing the text and audience interpretations from the perspective of sexuality I have also analysed the representation/performance of gender and the sexed body<sup>12</sup>. In chapter four I specifically address how the representation of gender is related to sexuality in terms of its portrayal and the audiences, and my own interpretations of them. In particular I address issues around the relationship between the portrayal of masculinity, sexuality and camp. In chapter six I consider gender in relation to the performance of my participant's identities. The notion of fluid sexuality has not just been seen in the context of ideologies of sex and gender however. In the wider cultural field the fragmentation of sexuality has been positioned as a symptom or cause of postmodernism, indeed there is a symmetry between the criticisms aimed at some queer theorists around a lack of 'material' in terms of their theorisations, and the criticisms aimed at postmodern theorists and their deconstruction of current media culture which is not 'empirically grounded'.

### **Audiences, identity and postmodernism**

Postmodernism remains one of the most contested issues in academia broadly, but also within media and cultural studies today. I am tempted to think that by the time there is any agreement about whether postmodernism has begun, if indeed modernism has ended and if postmodernism exists at all, that it will all be over, we will have missed the party, and will need to start theorising about what comes next. However, for now, I argue (along with Ang, 1996) that there is at least some consensus that there are characteristics of our Western cultural experience currently that we can define which are broadly being called the 'postmodern' and that there is probably a gradual uneven 'shift' from the modern to the postmodern. I also concur with Storr

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<sup>12</sup> I refer to gendered sexual identity throughout this thesis in an effort to highlight that the two are inextricably linked

(1999) in her assertion that we can distinguish between postmodern conditions and the cultural movement of the postmodern – although there are interconnections and overlaps.

Identity and the media are key territories for the debate around postmodernism. Academics such as Baudrillard (1983) and Storey (2001) suggest that there is no longer 'fixed' identity and that we are lost in a fragmented set of identities, which in part is fuelled by the hyper-reality of the media. Kellner (1995) however highlights that while media might be complicit in the conditions of postmodernism, all too often there are few examples of how postmodernism is identifiable in media texts or indeed how this can be seen in terms of 'media effects'. Thomas (2002) also notices this absence. In her study of feminism and fans she highlights that there is a lack of research which empirically examines identity in light of postmodern debates. Indeed, within the study of sexuality itself, some academics such as Storr (1999) even go so far as to suggest that the emergence of bisexuality 'into the open' can be seen as part of the conditions of postmodernism (she distinguishes this from the postmodern cultural movement). But she notes, along with Seidman (1995), Dollimore (1996) and Hennessey (1995) that there is a 'disconnect' between contemporary theories of sexuality (queer theory) and the 'material' aspects of the postmodern in society and culture.

An exception to this 'disconnect' can be seen, I would argue, in Steve Bailey's book *'Media Audiences and Identity'* (2005). Bailey tackles the postmodern version of the subject head on, arguing that the notion of the fluidity of identity suggests a less 'self-reflexive' individual (2005: 5). He posits that a problem with this assertion, while it can be grounded in studies of the 'symbolic networks in which the postmodern subject operates' (2005: 5), is that it 'entails a severe restriction or even elimination of a properly hermeneutic dimension to the subject; that is the subject is not granted the kind of self-reflection that depends upon the ability to transcend the immediacy and fluidity of social existence, even minimally' (2005:5). Ang also thinks along these lines, in her consideration of the value of audience research in a postmodern backdrop. She notes that the concept of 'lifestyle' has been used to capture the idea of fluid identity:

Lifestyles are the fluid and changeable popular aesthetic formations of identity produced through self-reflexive consumption and disembedded from stable social networks...But if such postmodern lifestyles suggest a liberation from social necessity, don't they also imply a compulsion to activeness, to self-reflexivity (sic), to creative self-construction? Seen this way, the 'active audience' represents a state of being *condemned* to freedom of choice. (1996: 13)

In this way, Ang is also suggesting that self-reflection and the much contested idea of 'audience activity' should be considered, but we must not assume that it makes the audience free. If the notion of fluid identity from a queer and postmodern view is one of interchangeability – seen in one way as a liberation but in another as a burden of work (Ang's view) - then grappling with the 'operations' of fluid identities when interacting with a TV text will shed light on this potential postmodern process of interchangeability and how it is positioned by the audience. I address this particularly in chapter six of the thesis where I highlight the need for more specificity around the notion of identity as a process given my analysis of audience interpretations. Indeed, related to the freedom we envisage around identity as a process, it would be almost impossible to conduct research in audience studies without considering the notion of agency.

Bailey, in his consideration of audience identity argues that we do not have to return to the 'classical' idea of the subject as a rational individual, free from the power of language or material economics in order to restore a 'hermeneutic' dimension to that subject. In this way, it seems that Bailey is suggesting that a cogent analysis of the interpretation process itself (both researcher and audience member) should not be disposed of completely despite criticism that we can be unsure of the agency of the individual. I agree with him in the sense that there are fewer audience studies in the media and cultural studies tradition which examine audience discourse to consider it in relation to the (re)construction of sexual or gendered audience identities (obvious exceptions are Austin and Radway which I have already reviewed). By that I mean that in representation research often the focus has been on the social reflections of the audience i.e. how did the text position lesbians in the eyes of housewives (Hallam and Marshment, 1995) or how did it position gay men in light of race and sexuality

(Hemphill, 1995). Such work has been privileged over, as can be seen in Austin's work, a consideration of what parts of the identification process can be observed in audience responses about a TV or filmic text.

Indeed, Bailey's assertions would seem to echo calls by academics such as Corner (1991) for a more profound and in-depth exploration of the rather well-used media studies term 'meaning'. That is not to say that 'meaning' is the same as 'identity'. Rather that all too often words such as meaning are used in media and cultural studies but in a relatively unsophisticated way. In that sense the same could be said of a consideration of audience identity vis-à-vis media consumption. Moreover, when thinking about the need for a deeper understanding of meaning and identity there must be linkages in the sense that it is at least partly through decoding meanings in texts that we can (re)construct and/or (re)assert our gendered sexual identities. In this sense, if we want to establish closer analysis of the interpretative process (and here I include the researcher's own interpretive practice) in relation to identity then this has to be coupled with more nuanced thinking around meaning decoding. In relation to this thesis then, and in terms of exploring some of the issues around postmodernism and identity, I aim to follow Bailey and Corner's lead in searching for audience responses which demonstrate re(negotiation) or (re)development of identity. I aspire to a nuanced approach which considers meanings in texts and their linkages to identity. I address this specifically in chapter six, continuing Bailey's thinking to consider how using a model of self-reflexivity can help highlight links between meaning making and identity (re)formation and also to consider how this can be linked to Butler's performance theory. By asking how theories of self-reflexivity can shed light on the links between meaning making and identity formation in textual interpretation, the issue of agency, or the degree of agency in self-reflexivity, becomes an important one to consider. It is also particularly important given the history of the topic of agency in the media studies field which has often been framed in the active/passive debate around media use.

### **Troubled terrain: media effects**

This interest in the (re)construction of audience identities steers me directly into the media effects debate, one of the most contested area of media studies and a course fraught with theoretical pitfalls. Indeed, in considering the political agency of the audience (and in that sense the active/passive debate) I am not the first to notice the tension that is caused by desire for political action through agency (and by default identity) and the onslaught of post-structuralist theory which, in its extreme forms, consigns the audience to be lost in a sea of discourse (Cormack, 2000; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Collins, 1989). Thomas (2002), in her comprehensive empirical study of fans and feminism asks these very questions. She notes how problematic it would be to simply take up either position – that is a social constructionist active identity construction view (often thought to be sociological) versus a postmodern post-structuralist notion of identities as fluid but unmanageable. This is also reflected in Storr's (1999) account of bisexuality as a postmodern phenomenon, where she notes that queer theory has tended to ignore the material but that there should be an attempt to consider the material and the discursive. She suggests 'such theory renounces the difficulties of coming to grips with the distinction and the interdependence between the material and the discursive, in favour of the much easier solution of collapsing the former into the latter.' (Storr, 1999: 317)

Here I agree with Thomas and Storr, but note an important question that this raises for this thesis: if queer theory with its strong post-structuralist underpinnings is heralding the power of fluid sexuality and indeed moving beyond sexual identity labels, then this must surely be in direct opposition to its own ability to constitute an active cohesive political movement under the banner or 'label' of queer. In this way, active identity (re)formation is at the heart of that debate, and any insights into the operations of identity (re)formation in relation to texts which include postmodern fluid sexual identities must be important and relevant to these arguments. Moreover, this tension within queer theory's own proposition, I would argue, requires us to navigate a careful critical course along its fault lines. In the same way as the boundaries or borders of sexuality often offer the best insights into its make-up, so do the boundaries of post-structuralism and social constructionism when thinking about identity. Indeed, to

return to Thomas's work, a key conclusion of her research on fans, is that participants were keen to ensure that their 'identities' were represented accurately and in that sense challenged postmodern and post-structuralist (and thus queer theory) notions of identity as an 'outmoded category' (2002: 182). In chapter's three and six I address this argument by analysing the discourses of my participants in relation to their aspirations for sexual identity politics versus the way they perform or (re) form their identities through interpretation and the research groups.

At this point, then, thinking about some of these debates around postmodern identity, I also want to draw attention to the slipperiness around exactly how academics have conceived postmodern identity. By this I mean that for some it means a lack of depth – a superficial version of identity (Bailey, 2005), for others it means the fragmentation of identity (Baudrillard, 1975), while for others such as Ang (1996) it means the ability or responsibility to choose different identities. For the purposes of this thesis I am arguing we have to see postmodern identity as something which has potential for fluidity, but is a process, and in that sense has some form to it. This dualism dovetails with the argument I have made about the social constructionist position of active identity formation and the post-structural notion of identity fluidity. In this thesis I try to hold on to these various positions when analysing my empirical data in search for indications of each of these ways of seeing identity and postmodern conceptions of it. The notion of fluidity as a postmodern concept has also been applied to thinking around the changing nature of TV narratives with academics suggesting increasing hybridity of TV texts could be seen as another aspect of the postmodern. This element of the postmodern also has significance for this thesis and in the last part of this introductory chapter I want to think about genre in relation to this project. After all, if we are examining the significance of gendered sexual representation in the series then the pressures of genre, such as the need for 'action heroes' in science fiction, needs to be considered and accounted for.

### **Generic pressures**

Ostensibly *Torchwood*, with its links to *Dr Who*, and its use of tropes including aliens, advanced technology and 'time distortion' storylines, could be defined as science

fiction. If we consider British science fiction more specifically, then as Cook and Wright note it has often been 'concerned with social and cultural preoccupations of the time...' or '...political tensions' (2006: 3). They go on to suggest that British science fiction TV has also often taken a darker, whimsical and eccentric approach to science fiction giving it a realistic edge that science fiction television from other parts of the world has not lived up to. In the case of *Torchwood* (with its unashamed representation of the sexual spectrum and the inclusion of the eccentric Captain Jack Harkness, the military coat wearing pansexual) it would certainly fit this definition of British TV Science fiction. If we accept this definition of the series then in thinking about the representations of gendered sexuality we need to consider how *Torchwood* would fit into the canon of TV British science fiction. Indeed before *Torchwood* there is a history of science fiction TV which creates expectations amongst the audience, and TV producers. As Creeber notes: "they [*the audience*] will have made an active choice either to watch or, if their preferences dictate, to avoid it. They will have done so on the basis of advertising, by reviews and previews...or by the presence of particular performers." (2002: 32). In this way, then, genre enables the audience to classify a TV show and decide if they want to try it or not. While there is often an element of adaptation and creativity in TV genre – a playing with its boundaries – there also often needs to be key characterisations such as 'the action hero' in science fiction or the darker tropes of British Science fiction that Cook and Wright mention, if only not to disappoint an audience which has been 'marketed' to in a certain way. This can certainly be seen in *Torchwood* in terms of the inclusion of John Barrowman as a leading man from the newly revived *Dr Who* as well as the inclusion of alien chases in the trailers aired prior to the start of season one. However, in relation to TV a number of academics (Parks, 2003 and Feuer, 1992) have noted its increasing generic hybridity; this can also be seen in terms of *Torchwood* in relation to the use of themes from crime drama including gore, car chases and inclusion of police/Government agency narratives alongside the futuristic unearthly science fiction tropes. Whether or not the text is hybridised, the expectations of the audience are developed through key tropes which suggest the series is science-fiction or even a hybrid of that and a crime serial. Audiences tune in to watch at least partially based on some of the excerpts of the



series that have been previewed and this also sets up expectations in the audience for what they hope to consume as part of their viewing experience.

The audience's interpretations and expectations of genre become an important part of this thesis for two further reasons. First, by including tropes from science fiction there are generic pressures placed upon other elements of the text such as gendered sexual representation, which in the case of this thesis need to be accounted for. Second, its significance in the history of queer TV is also of relevance in relation to genre: if we say that the series is mostly science fictions then it has a particular place in the history of that type of television. From a genre perspective, then, in this thesis I aim to consider to what extent *Torchwood* can be seen to challenge institutional norms around its generic conventions in terms of science fiction. How do my respondents' experiences of the genre match up to some of the media and academic positioning of the series as science fiction? In order to think about that I want to briefly consider science fiction as a genre and how it has represented alternative sexuality in the past.

### **Queers...lost in space**

Audience research around sexuality in terms of science fiction film and TV is virtually non-existent. While there is important research focusing on science fiction audiences (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995), despite its significance in terms of its focus on *Doctor Who*, its use of focus group research and its consideration of the desire of *Star Trek* fans for the inclusion of queer characters, the book addresses ideology and fan/producer struggles rather than sexuality in science fiction texts specifically. In terms of gender and sexuality there is work which considers gender from a feminist perspective, much of this research has focused on the role of women as part of sci-fi films – the many analyses of Ripley's character in the *Alien* franchise (Stacey, 2003; Hills, 1999 and Creed, 1993) and its potential for offering a liberating representation as the female 'hero' of the film being a prime example. As Sobchack notes in her consideration of sex and the science fiction film, 'Human biological sexuality and women as figures of its representation have been repressed in the male-dominated, action orientated narratives of most American science fiction films from the 1950s to the present' (1990: 103). There are exceptions – Sobchack cites films such as *The Stepford Wives* (1975)

where female sexuality is central or *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958), where female sexuality exists for the gratification of alien forms. While there is some academic analysis of homosexuality in sci-fi such as Benshoff's volume (1997), this focuses mainly on the horror movie and has to search for references to homosexuality in what is implied in many films. For example, she again refers to the film *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* and suggests that the alien/husband character's desire to meet strange men in a park rather than be at home with his wife signifies a fear of gay men who pass as straight.

This sparse attention to alternative sexuality and sci-fi is partly a reflection of a lack of representation within this genre. One could hypothesise that it is no coincidence that there is little gay representation in sci-fi texts. The interest that feminist writers have taken in the few depictions of women as alpha heroes in sci-fi is evidence enough that it is generally a male dominated genre and one specifically dominated by characterisations of a particular kind of masculine man. There is also the notion that sci-fi as a genre itself is seen to be gendered. As King and Krzywinska (2000) note: 'With its focus sometimes on science and technology as "toys for the boys" and its relationship to genres such as the horror and the western, the appeal of sci-fi might be considered chiefly to be masculine' (37). While, as King and Krzywinska point out, Hollywood often splices some romance and melodrama into sci-fi in order to keep the appeal of its films open to wider audiences, sci-fi nonetheless has a reputation for being a 'laddish' preoccupation. In that way, sci-fi as a genre could be seen as another example of masculine hegemony placing gay masculinity lower on the scale of importance than that of heterosexual masculinity therefore ensuring that it is not depicted. Indeed, in Creeber's analysis of British TV sci-fi he notes 'While science fiction would seem to take us outside of [the] structuring elements of class and gender by a discourse of fantasy and futurism, the metaphorical transformations always speak about the historical time which the production took place' (2002: 49). Science fiction might offer a vision of the future, but it is one still structured by pervasive influences of today's culture. In chapter five I ask how sexual representation as part of a utopian discourse fits with audience expectations and experiences of genre, and indeed how significant the representation of fluid sexuality is in terms science fiction television.

## Summary and structure of the thesis

In this introductory chapter I have outlined the themes present in the thesis and also highlighted the questions that I address in the following chapters. While overall the thesis has as its broad aim an investigation into audience responses around the fluid sexual representation in *Torchwood*, there are a number of important and related perspectives which I need to analyse in relation to this question. In terms of structure, I first consider the audience project and its method in chapter two. In chapter three I address issues of the representation of sexuality and my audiences' responses. I have suggested that gender is inextricably linked to sexuality and therefore in chapter four I turn to gender and the sexed body and consider my own and my audiences' interpretations in relation to this. I have argued that when analysing a TV text, as Corner (1998) has noted, we must also think about its genre in terms of how it might be related to interpretations of representations. With that in mind, in chapter four I address mine and my respondent's experiences of the genre of *Torchwood* and consider its relationship with sexual representation across the four seasons of the series. As an audience project it is also impossible to separate my own and my participants' performances of their gendered sexual identities in the focus group research. In chapter six, I therefore consider the relationships between meaning making from sexual representations and identity (re) formation and performance. Finally in chapter seven, the discussion chapter, I bring these strands together to consider how the perspectives of gender, genre and participants identities inform wider discussions about the sexual liberation offered in *Torchwood* and the political possibilities of fluid sexuality. First, however, it is important to consider the development process and how I planned and executed the methodological element of this thesis.

## THE RESEARCH DESIGN

In the last chapter I outlined the rationale for conducting audience research against the backdrop of a relatively new area of study where issues of sexuality and queer politics seem to be under-represented. Critical audience research (or the 'new audience studies' as it is often referred) is itself a relatively new multi-disciplinary field which has evolved in a heterogenous way borrowing from various disciplines. In each piece of audience work there are central objectives, usually a drive to think about social inequalities or change in relation to media and culture (Gray, 2003). However, the methods employed in each study vary and there has been little in the way of summarising or creating textbook approaches with notable exceptions such as Gray's work (2003). The field has developed in a more exploratory fashion whereby researchers have tried different approaches to 'test' their efficacy. Moreover, the epistemological roots of audience research with its underpinnings in media and cultural studies means that the field is reluctant to simply follow frameworks established by the social sciences for qualitative research. On the whole this is a distrust of the 'quasi-scientific' idea that by following homogenous research designs we will more likely uncover objective 'truth'. As Ang suggests media and cultural studies is on the whole aware of the 'Foucaultian reminder that the production of knowledge is always bound up in a network of power relations' (1999: 97). Both for my own research, and for many previous audience studies, a pursuit of 'objective' knowledge is discounted. Therefore the 'research' design becomes less about how well the research can produce an overall picture of a group of people, and more about the needs of the project and the voices of those involved in the research. This is not to say that there is not an interest in the information generated by the research, but that curiosity is about issues such as the revelation of power through language. The corollary of the idiosyncratic nature of many audience studies, is that as a critical audience researcher, there is a need to strike a balance between reviewing previous research to consider methods and to engage in my own inquiry about what is the most appropriate and effective research approach; to define an approach that will best help me better understand the reception of issues of sexuality and gender in *Torchwood*

and to think about the relationships between textual interpretation, identity (re)formation and gendered sexual performance.

In this chapter, then, I specifically want to think about the methodological issues at stake for this project. I focus on the key facets of the research that I believe need to be discussed in order to make the research as transparent as possible as well as some of the key moments in the research process where I adapted or rethought my research strategy. Research is an on-going process from the moment you start, to the moment you finish, and indeed after you have finished the process continues for you and participants in terms of the reverberations of the experience into one's life and in the case of the researcher into their own identity and future identity as an academic and researcher. I start by addressing some of the broader issues of audience research and my position in relation to how we can 'find an audience'. I then move on to more specific methodological issues highlighting my rationale for using focus group methods. Then I give details of how the sessions were conducted and focus on some of the issues of holding of focus groups and how I as a researcher negotiated them.

### **Locating the audience**

Before addressing specific issues of choice of methodology, I would first like to consider first the wider question of how, and if, we can define and locate an audience in the first place. Moores (1993) has suggested that there is no audience for us to find, no definable object for us to locate. Nightingale (1996) points out in her review of audience theory, that the audience is not a 'natural' phenomenon, it is those that want to locate an audience which define it. Indeed, we should be mindful of the temptation to objectify the audience in search for the truth that is out there, the potential that we can classify media consumers in order to fully understand them. However, there is a paradox in our aims as critical media researchers to find out about media consumption, and the suspicion of empiricism (and one which mirrors queer studies which consists of researchers with a common interest which its own political aspiration for fluidity denies). Our critiques often centre on analytical groupings such as gender or class and in order to think about these patterns there is a necessity to classify. Our desire to research culture is pitted against rational argumentation around

the problematic of the power of language as the funnel by which we comprehend the world; that to define the real we must accept it is only definable through language. However, I want to suggest that while the political aspirations of media and cultural studies are one reason why we should not dispose of the urge to organise and think about the location of power, there is also the relation of audiences with wider institutions. While we rightly ask who is this conception of audience(s) for, those that come together, even if only briefly through the shared experience of watching the same episode of a soap or TV drama, still have effects in relation to media institutions; they complain; switch on or off; choose to watch the series on 4OD rather than 'real-time' broadcast; choose (or not) to watch the next series of *Torchwood* based on their experience of the previous one. In a similar manner media institutions still choose to develop another series based on ratings; choose when to air TV programmes; and respond to consumers' complaints. While we might only be able to envisage or watch audience(s) through discourse, audience(s) still have effects and so do institutions, even if in the end we comprehend those effects through discourse. Discourses are powerful but they do not alone make events, they are inextricably linked to them. In that way, in this research I envisage audiences and their discourse as bound up in the reproduction of ideologies that maintain institutional systems which can be oppressive. I conceive of audiences in order to recognise their power and potential in the same way that we are happy to recognise the power and domination of the media industry. That is not to say the power of the audience is the same as media institutions. However, it is to suggest that to deny the existence of the audience(s) shared experiences seems problematic.

Methodologically, then, I have tried to pursue an approach which tries to hold on to some of the ambiguities of audience(s), while recognising the context of those audience(s). While wanting to foreground that we should not classify the participant only by an element of for example sexual orientation, where possible I have contextualised those in the research if appropriate. This I hope helps me to avoid another key criticism which has been levelled at much of the research in the 'new audience' paradigm; the reduction of media consumption to the text-reader encounter. The focus of this research is inevitably the encounter between my participants and the

*Torchwood* text and the related interpretations and moments of identity (re)formation or performance. However, as Ang (1996) has argued, the logical progression of arguments put forward by Hall (1980) and Morley (1980) regarding the contextuality of media interpretation is 'radical contextualism', the pursuit of tracing media consumption's subsequent interplay with everyday practices and vice versa. In this way, I have pursued a research approach which acknowledges this. However, I would not claim that it can be seen as 'contextual' in terms of the viewing experience. Due to financial restraints and a desire for anonymity around a sensitive subject, my studies did not take place in what could be termed more 'naturalistic' viewing settings such as the living room<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, I wanted to try and bring as much social context as was feasible to the research within my financial restraints in order that I could interpret the way sexual gendered identity itself was on display when groups are interpreting a text. With that in mind, focus group methodology offered many advantages for me. In the following section I want to discuss further why focus group research is increasingly being used by social political researchers and what the benefits and limitations were for my research.

### **Social interaction and context**

Perhaps the most obvious and important benefit of focus group method is its ability to better represent that identity and meaning making are subject to their social context. As Hall (1980) theorised most of our reality is negotiated through language and language is inherently social, therefore an understanding of the way language is situated in the social seems appropriate. Moreover, as Wilkinson (1999) notes in her consideration of focus group methodology, to know people better, is to see them in a social context. We should not reduce people to their 'cognition' or inner dynamic. She demonstrates this by quoting Fine and Gordon who make the rather pertinent point that: 'if you really want to know either of us then: ...do not put us in a laboratory, or hand us a survey, or even interview us separately in our homes. Watch me (Michelle Fine) with women friends, my son, his father, my niece, or my mother and you will see what feels authentic to me. (Fine and Gordon, 1989: 159).'

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<sup>13</sup> The research took places in various locations but they were all located centrally in order to make attendance as easy as possible for the participants. I used rooms which were relatively neutral in décor and economically priced.

The benefits of this method for my research in terms of reflecting the social context of TV interpretation and meaning making can be seen through some of the participants in my research. For example, in two groups some of my participants were friends and evidence of the way friends might interact and discuss textual meaning was apparent in their exchanges at points in the groups:

*Extract 1*

Pilot group - Louise: 'Yeah I'm not sure BBC would have put it on if it wasn't related to Dr Who'

Gillian: 'It would be too niche without that, people would think it was a show about sex rather than a show about sci-fi mmmm ... nurr...mmm... I suppose it's sort of how they would interpret it...sort of if you like sci—fi ... errr ... (looks up and frustrated) I can't get out what I am thinking...taps her head...'. (*laughs*)

[CH: 'It's ok, it is getting late.']

Rosie: 'You mean if it's a sci-fi show then people who like sci-fi will kind of watch it.'

Clare: 'Yeah...'

*Extract 2*

Gillian: 'Yes...there was one episode where Gwen tried to tell him the truth about all her affairs but kept drugging him with...'

Rosie: 'Repcon'

Gillian: 'Yes of course it's called Repcon.'

In the two extracts above Rosie's friendship with Gillian (which they highlighted to me at the beginning of the session) becomes apparent and is part of the way the two interpret the text in two ways. In the first extract, Gillian is having difficulty expressing what she means, Rosie as a friend tries to help her by summarising her point which Gillian agrees with. In this way, they work together to interpret what they think are important generic traits of the series. This type of exchange happens all the time when



for example we are with friends discussing what we have watched, and we're trying to remember its features and a friend might rescue us with the name of a character or an actor. In the second exchange another familiar trope of friendship and its interrelation with the media can be seen, where Rosie's evidence of textual knowledge and therefore revelation of her fandom is used by Gillian to ridicule her. This is something only available to a friend who can draw on the knowledge of her wider identity and tease her with it to reinforce the bonds of their friendship. In this way, then, while my focus groups could not always deliver the kind of 'media ethnography' or radical contextualism that Ang (1996) has been calling for, but it could still offer some of the social context that feminists have been arguing for (Radway, 1984). Moreover, Wilkinson (1999) notes that many focus group studies neglect to consider exchanges between participants. In this thesis, therefore, as well as focusing on individuals contributions to the groups, I endeavour to think about the dynamics of the groups and their impact on interpretation as well as the revelation of identity performance or discourse or gendered sexuality. Indeed, being able to capture the way individuals performed their gendered sexual identities in the group was another advantage of the focus group method.

### **Performativity/identity**

One of the key objectives of my research project was to think about the way texts might be part of identity (re)formation. I wanted to think about glimpses of identity (re)formation but also more specifically about performance theory in relation to textual interpretation and identity making. Butler's theories around performance are much predicated on the way that they are social reproductions, the stuck records of gender. Indeed, much of the underpinning of poststructuralist theory, which has been prevalent in media and cultural studies for some time now, is the Foucaultian notion that identity is socially constructed. However, as many media and sociology academics have noted (Kellner, 1995; Seidman, 1993; Sunderland and Litosseliti, 2002), while there is a considerable theoretical body of work making this assertion (this would include much of queer theory) there is less empirical work which explores how this process takes place. In this way, focus groups that bring together analysis of the

performance of gendered sexual identity and media research can help to develop an under-represented part of the field.

In their consideration of the pervasive nature of hegemonic masculinity Sunderland and Litoselliti raise the need for more discourse analysis in terms of gender identity (2002). They note that there is much academic talk regarding the protected dominance of men through institutions, but that we need to highlight better how men protect dominant masculine hegemony through everyday micro-talk. This type of 'performativity', or showing how masculine identity is reaffirmed in a group situation, can be seen and thought about through focus group research. For example, in chapter six, one participant, Robert demonstrates quite clearly how he 'defends' discourses of gender difference where he challenges another group member to suggest that showing females in action orientated scenarios is politically motivated, and in that sense not a 'valid' representation. In this way, the focus group fits particularly well with the aim of my research to be able to investigate empirically how the 'operations' of gender oppression work in social contexts. Indeed, another advantage to this method is related to the revelation of discourses of misogyny in my focus groups but in terms of the experiences of the participants themselves.

### **Consciousness raising**

In her review of the benefits of focus groups for feminist research Wilkinson notes that there has been interest in the similarities of focus groups to the consciousness raising sessions of the early years of second-wave feminism (1999). She highlights that the experience of sexual harassment was 'named' and identified through early consciousness raising groups. In this sense, in terms of my study there is a hope that by bringing together participants from queer and non-queer backgrounds issues such as queer politics, and in particular the challenges of negotiating the 'need' for identity in relation to sexuality, might be discussed in the forum of focus groups which are in some ways mini 'public spheres'. Indeed, this type of transformative potential is evident in my groups even if only through Robert's journey. I argue in chapter six that while identity change for him in relation to sexuality or gender would not be easy, by the end of the session he has reflected on some of the decisions he has made in earlier

life which seem to have contributed to his reproduction of discourses of homophobia. In this sense it is possible to see the political potential of groups such as these where those from different lifestyles can debate their views on sexuality and potentially understand why a minority group might experience oppression. That is not to say that I set out to create action research which would 'change' views regarding fluid sexuality or even encourage open discussion of queer sexualities, but it is a useful side-effect. The group dynamic developed by focus groups and the subsequent sharing of opinions can be seen as liberating but it has also been suggested by some (Krueger, 1988) that the group dynamic is a distraction from the aims of research, a disadvantage which I would like to challenge.

### **Non-hierarchical**

The non-hierarchical nature of the focus group for some researchers means that there are contributions that are not central to its research objectives (Gray, 2003 and Watts and Ebutt, 1987). There are occasions in my own research where the group discussions did veer away from the central topic, for example in group four there were several discussions of the latest episode of *Dr Who*, which while loosely related to topic in terms of the content which was regarding the sexuality of the characters was of course unrelated to the text in question. In this situation I needed to bring the conversation back to the text. However, the benefits of the non-hierarchical nature of the focus group and the need at times to facilitate the conversation for me outweighed the disadvantages. The diversification of lines of enquiry created by the focus group situation was in fact beneficial to me. For example, in the pilot group of my research which was predominantly attended by self-identified 'straight' respondents, a theme of 'sexual liberation' emerged which was separate to issues around labelling or sexuality which I had been determined to address as part of the group. Instead what became apparent is that for many in the group the general notion of sexual relations not being bound up in long term emotional relationships was important and liberatory for them. It reminded me that there are confines to straight identity bound up with heteronormativity that *Torchwood* was dealing with which those who might not relate to the queer sexuality of the story still found liberatory. In that way the focus group situation and the direction of the group talk, took me on a

different trajectory, and I would argue is therefore one of the benefits of this type of research.

In terms of a methodology for the research, then, I have argued that focus groups are relevant to the aims of my research. In the following sections I will outline the details of how I planned, executed and adapted my focus group strategy as I developed the research. Where appropriate I will raise issues which I think need to be addressed methodologically where there is currently a void in terms of addressing them in queer audience studies. Before I embarked on recruitment I considered who I wanted to include in the 'sample'. As part of this I needed to adapt my research as it developed and next I want to elaborate further in that element of the research process.

### **Cultists, class and the sexuality of the sample**

My approach to sampling changed as I began the recruitment process and started to 'feel' my way through what worked. It highlights how the social dynamics of research are an integral part of that research. Initially, I had intended to recruit two LGBT groups and two self-identified 'straight' groups. In doing so, I was not attempting to make my research representative. It would not be possible to make my project representative due to financial restrictions in relation to the size and capacity of the project. Moreover, while classifying respondents into groups has benefits in terms of being able to make comparisons and think about how circumstances of class, gender, race or sexuality might relate to my participants readings of the text and their own identity construction, it would be problematic to project this outwards as being representative of all people in those groups. Nevertheless, I did want to provide environments where participants felt more comfortable to speak openly and my intention was that by creating groups of like-minded interest in terms of sexuality this would be more attainable.

However, once I embarked upon the recruitment process, I tailored my sampling strategy in reaction to my experience of the search for respondents. I conducted an initial pilot group to test the format and question schedule I devised for the research (see appendix one). For this group I took the decision that it was less important to recruit by sexual identity; instead, the priority was to test my ideas and approach for

the group. Once I began recruiting for the first two of the four following groups, I began asking respondents about their self-identified sexuality in order to attempt to organise the groups around this. It soon became clear that this approach was problematic. Most of the respondents who replied to my advertisement did not provide the information, meaning that I would have to go back to them via email to ask again, if the notion of classification was to have any meaning. In doing so I began to recognise that I was pursuing them for their sexual identity (or for an indication that they did not want to be identified by any sexual category) and this made me uncomfortable, given the subject content of my research about the potential of fluid sexuality. At this stage, of course, it was not clear whether my participants would be positive about discourses of fluid sexuality and how this would contrast with their own performances or revelations of sexual gendered identity in the groups. I was faced with a dilemma between my own political aspirations, which would be to develop integrated groups, and a more rational aim as a researcher to 'analyse' differences through classification. However, it was the 'feeling' of trying to recruit based on sexual identity that deterred me in the end. Once I reflected upon that feeling I realised that to have started to group my participants in this way would have been to impose my own ideas about sexual identity and how it would affect relations upon them. Of course, these classifications exist and operate pervasively in our lives all the time, and to that end it is problematic to deny them, or to propose that we can't take some interest in research in relation to them. However, as a researcher we are also part of a social fabric, we cannot and should not separate ourselves from it. When you meet someone you might modify your relations with someone based on the interactions, or 'feeling' you get. In that way, as a researcher we are exposed to the social mores of everyday life and therefore we should take notice of the feelings we encounter as part of everyday life in our research.

As an alternative, and with the aim of at least being able to think about how my participants' history and current sexual gendered identity, I asked the respondents to provide their sexual identity, if they wanted to, on the consent form at the beginning of the research session (see appendix two). This had the further advantage of asking the participant in a more indirect way about their sexual identity and of allowing them

to provide this information in a relatively confidential way to me in the group rather than talking about this openly should they not want to. I also chose to include a question about how my respondents would define themselves in terms of class. I used a rather crude definition of working, middle and upper class which of course means that there are issues regarding how people define their own class versus how society might 'class' them in terms of cultural and economic capital. Nevertheless I hoped that this would give some broad indication of background but as will become evident once I started recruiting this factor for comparison become on the whole redundant. In addition to wanting a mix of class and sexual background, I wanted to include a range of voices in terms of experience of the text.

I had determined that I wanted to avoid only recruiting what Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) define as 'cultists'. By this I mean that *Torchwood* and its parent show *Dr Who* have many dedicated followers and fans evinced by the plethora of fan websites for the series as well as the significant presence of the series on 'cult TV' websites. While I did not want to preclude those who would define themselves as fans of the series, I did want to include those in my research who may have not seen the series or who may be more casual consumers of the text. The specialist knowledge that some fans develop can be a benefit in this type of research giving them an in-depth understanding of the text and an ability to place issues in an episode in the context of the rest of the series for example. However, these viewers might also be easier to recruit given the nature of their interest and therefore the research could become dominated by that type of viewers despite there being less dedicated consumers of the show. In that way, their social context, sexuality and so on are elements of their identity that they bring to the research but so too are their previous relationship with the text and I wanted as diverse a range of voices in that context too. I therefore tried to develop a recruitment strategy which would help to deliver this mix of textual experiences.

### **Recruitment**

In the first instance I had planned to recruit participants through online advertising in order to keep costs down. Moreover, in terms of my target audiences for the focus

groups this seemed like an appropriate method. I posted online advertisements on a range of sites which appeal to different audiences as follows:

- Digital Spy (TV general forum) [www.digitalspy.com](http://www.digitalspy.com) (general TV interest)
- TV Chat [www.tchat.co.uk](http://www.tchat.co.uk) (general TV interest)
- Gallifrey Base - <http://gallifreybase.com/forum/> (fans/cultists)
- Torchwood Forum [www.torchwoodforum.com](http://www.torchwoodforum.com) \*(fans/cultists)
- Queeruk.net [www.queeruk.net](http://www.queeruk.net) (queer general interest)

While my posts generated initial interest from three participants, it soon became clear that I would not be able to generate sufficient respondent numbers for my Brighton groups through this method alone. Part of the issue was potentially that my research was explicitly about sexual representation and in that way would be taboo for many people. It could be difficult either as a general topic or if participants have an alternative sexual identity which for many can still be difficult to address in public situations or there might be fear that unresolved issues of sexuality will arise in those situations. Indeed Browne, a queer social geographer, highlights how recruiting for research which focuses on individuals or groups who are not 'validated by society' can be problematic (2005: 47). She discusses her use of the 'snowballing' method to address the challenges of recruiting people in oppressed groups for her research looking at non-heterosexual women. The method utilises social networking sites as a 'starting' point for cascading out the call for participation in research through your own friends. I chose to use my network of friends on Facebook to start my snowballs. The technique in my case involved developing a message (see appendix three) to send to friends about my research. The message explains what the study is about and provides an email address for potential participants to respond to. I asked respondents to provide brief details about why they were interested in the research, whether they were employed and what their occupation was. Through the snowballing technique I became thoroughly embedded in the project as the recruitment process happened through my friends. While this could be said to introduce 'bias' I suggest that this approach fits with my argument that I cannot and should not be separated from the research. Moreover, I have a range of straight, gay, bi, queer identified friends, so this method allowed me to take advantage of these pre-

existing networks in order to reach out to people with various sexual orientations and identifications and hopefully access their social networks. Using Facebook also meant that those interested in the research could find out about it by messaging me back. This process would then be smoother because there was already an existing connection between me and the potential participant. Also, as my friends hopefully passed the message on, those receiving the message would be 'connected' to my friend giving a sense of 'safety' that would be less available through more 'cold' methods of recruiting such as online advertising.

Of course with any element of research method we need to be aware of its limitations. One potential limitation is that it could be seen as 'biased' in that the participants are drawn from my network of friends. Browne highlights it can put participants off because they do not want to reveal information to you that could be relayed to their friends, even with reassurances of confidentiality. Also some friends on Facebook are inevitably less close in relational terms and they might not portray you and your research to their friends in as positive light as you would hope. While inevitably this will mean that there might be interest in my research due to the 'connection' I have with those responding, and in that way participants might interpret the text differently, in a broader sense I suggest that this also has benefits in that in real life we do interpret texts with people we know. We chat about TV shows at work or with our friends. Indeed, as I have already mentioned the technique helped me to bring small groups of friends into the research as was the case in the pilot group. In Brighton group two, Rich brought three friends to the group, and as a prominent figure in the gay community in Brighton he recruited on my behalf through his own extensive queer Facebook network. In this way, then, recruiting through snowball techniques has the advantages of being economical, of taking advantage of existing connections that help to instil confidence in those interested in the research which is valuable in research with 'oppressed' groups, and also means that friends might come along to the groups to lend each other support and allow the researcher some insight into how media might be discussed with friends.



### Conducting the groups

In the end I was able to conduct five groups each with between four and seven participants. Kitzinger in her consideration of sociological focus groups notes that several contributors to her volume on focus groups suggest that between four and six participants is an ideal number and even 'as few as three' (1999: 8). The initial group was a pilot study in the grounds of the University of Sussex with six participants. The group was made up of five female and two male academics, researchers and university administration staff. There was a mix of sexual orientations although surprisingly in terms of the subject matter the group was predominantly made up of self-identified straight respondents. I then held two groups in Brighton and two groups in London. All four subsequent groups included a good mix of men and women and self-identified sexual orientations. Most of those who were not straight either referred to themselves as gay or queer. A full run down of the known occupations, class identifications and self-identified sexual orientations can be seen in appendix four.

Each group ran for approximately one hour and 30 minutes. In the first 45 minutes I asked the respondents to fill in and complete an informed consent form (appendix two) which highlighted the importance of confidentiality in the research and that gave them the option to remain anonymous. It also spelt out the 'risk' involved in the research as minimal and I included a brief synopsis of the series on the form for those who had never seen it before. The form was reviewed and approved by the Department of Media, Film and Music research ethics committee at the University of Sussex. I then screened the first episode of season two of *Torchwood, Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. I chose the episode because arguably it contained the most references to fluid sexuality in one episode, although there had been references in other episodes. As I conduct detailed analysis of this episode through my own readings and my participants I will now give a synopsis of the episode to help contextualise the interpretations. I have highlighted sections which relate to fluid sexuality or are referred to by my participants in the focus groups.

## Episode Synopsis

The opening scene of the episode features an alien that looks like a blowfish driving a fast car pursued by the Torchwood team. They trace the car to a suburban family house and find the blowfish holding a child hostage with the mother in the background. While the team hesitates to kill the blowfish alien, their estranged team leader Captain Jack Harkness returns, emerges from the background and shoots the alien dead.

In the next scene a time rift opens on a car park roof. Captain John Hart emerges from the rift, a character played by James Marsters previously famous for his leading part in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003)*. He immediately kills a man and then threatens another. He heads to a local bar.

**Captain John arrives at the local bar and threatens everyone with a gun forcing them to leave while flirting with women and men on the way.** The Torchwood team find the dead body of the man that Captain John killed. Captain Jack Harkness then gets a message from Captain John which has been sent through a time wrist watch – it is delivered in the style of the holographic message given by R2D2 to Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars (1976)*. Captain Jack goes to find Captain John at the bar.

**Captain Jack enters the bar and he and Captain John have a ‘Western’ style stand-off with hands on guns, then they kiss, then they have a bar brawl.** They catch up on old times. The Torchwood team are hiding in the background but Captain John discovers them and threatens them with his gun to encourage them to reveal themselves.

**Captain Jack explains John is an old friend – they joke that they had a ‘relationship’ and they argue about which one was ‘the wife’.**

Captain Jack takes Captain John to the Torchwood base. Here Captain John explains that he is trying to track down three canisters which have found their way to this time zone on Earth by mistake. They are highly explosive and dangerous. The Torchwood team agree to help Captain John find them. **Captain Jack has a heart to heart with Gwen and finds out that in his absence she has become engaged. He flirts with her.** Then he warns her that Captain John is dangerous and she should be careful and not kiss him.

Captain John and Gwen look for the canister together in a cargo bay. Gwen receives a call from her fiancé explaining that he has got a new job. Captain John teases her about her boyfriend. Then they enter a cargo container to find the canister. **Captain John kisses Gwen and then tells her he has administered a paralysing drug. She falls to the floor.**

The team doctor Owen and the team technical expert Toshi are in a warehouse. They flirt with each other and find the canister. John emerges from the shadows and shoots Owen. Toshi tends to him.

**Captain Jack and Ianto are searching an office block for the canister. Jack asks Ianto on a date and he accepts.** Captain Jack goes to the roof on his own for the canister. John corners Ianto and threatens him with a gun sending him off to find Owen and Toshi and flirts with him before he leaves suggesting that he is pretty. John then finds Jack on the roof and pushes him off leaving him for dead.

Ianto finds Owen and Toshi and they go searching for Gwen together. They find Gwen and administer an anti-toxin. John finds his way back to the base and puts the objects from the canisters together. The Torchwood team emerge from the shadows and threaten Captain John collectively with their guns. Captain Jack then emerges explaining to Captain John's surprise that he cannot be killed.

Captain John puts a device together from the three canisters under the teams supervisions explaining that a woman he was seeing gave it to him and that's why he wanted to find it as there could be a valuable diamond in the object once it was engaged. However a holographic image of the woman explains to John that there is no diamond and the object turns into a bomb that attaches itself to John. John handcuffs himself to Gwen. She decides the only way to stop the bomb going off is to take John into the time rift with her. Most of the team set out to do this but Captain Jack and Owen stay behind.

**On the way to the rift John highlights in the car that he fancies boys girls and even a poodle.** At the rift the team starts to head towards the opening of the rift but Captain Jack and Owen arrive just as Gwen is about to pull John into the rift. They administer a

needle to John and the bomb drops off John. They throw the bomb into the rift and it explodes changing day to night and reverting all events that took place in the episode. John then reveals he has a key to the cuffs and undoes the cuffs between him and Gwen. She then punches him. Captain Jack orders John to go back through the rift. They kiss and he leaves explaining that he knows where Gray is – a character we discover later in the series is Captain Jack's brother. The episode ends with the team walking away.

### **The focus group procedure**

After showing the episode I began the group which was recorded by audio and video equipment. I decided to include video equipment in order to be able to review non-verbal communication which would easily be forgotten but also to act as an audio backup. I used a focus group schedule to help me guide the conversation. I also provided drinks and snacks for the group to consume during the screening and discussion. The subsequent discussion lasted about 45 minutes for each group at the end of which time I thanked the group and for the London groups provided them with £10 which I had agreed with the University of Sussex could be used to cover expenses where travel costs are particularly high. Once the groups were completed I transcribed three of the five groups in order to get as close to the data as possible and purchased the assistance of a transcription company to transcribe two groups. Before I address my approach to analysis of the transcripts, I want to consider my role in relation to facilitation of the groups.

### **My own identity in the groups**

What I bring to the research is important in terms of the way I interacted with the participants and interpreted the results (Krippendorff, 2004; Ruddock, 2001). Therefore, I need to be 'upfront' about my own views and identity, in order that any consideration of my own, and the groups' readings of the text, can be understood within the context of my own identity as a researcher. As Waterton and Wynne note in their consideration of focus groups: 'The pretence of the researchers in the group and the way in which certain kinds of identification may reflect participants relationships with the researcher needs to be part of that consideration.' (1999: 139).

However, while in some situations I tried to remain neutral in the group, such as when dealing with views that I would normally engage with perhaps more confrontationally in everyday life, I did also at times bring my own perspectives. This was to maintain the 'flow' of the group if there was a long silence for example, but also to 'bring' something of myself to the groups. In this way, the position I adopted was at times almost as a member of the discussion. The following is an example of how sometimes it was natural for me to 'take part' in the conversations:

Grp 2 - Harry: 'Some of the thing in the office was a bit prime suspect for me but between two guys – the sexual tension side of it appeared just like that'.

Craig Haslop (CH): 'Someone said in another group that it was quite interesting that the genres are mixed up as well and they talked about as a having a Casualtiesque feeling about it which is something I had never really thought about before.'

Sue: *laughs*

CH: 'It is quite true – lots of emergency medical scenes and blood and I think it's interesting how that has been mixed up ok so does anybody chosen not to watch the show or is it just hadn't come up.'

Ben: 'I decided not to watch the new *Doctor Who* stuff because I thought it looked really cheap and childish and then *Doctor Who* being a spin off that was the connection for me.'

Shane: 'I had watched one episode before which focused on a relationship between Captain Jack and the office boy – yentil or...'

This matches my approach to the research overall that while it would be problematic to deny my role as the researcher, it would also be unrealistic to think that I am somehow separate to, or not part of the conversations that were taking place. Indeed, throughout this research I have aimed to try and avoid a criticism of Morley's Family Television study where Ang notes, 'Morley's voice is exclusively that of the earnest researcher; the writer's 'I', almost completely eliminated from the surface of the text, is apparently a disembodied subject solely driven by a disinterested wish to contribute

to 'scientific progress' (1989: 107). In this way, I do use 'I' as an acknowledgement of my own place within this research. Moreover, by taking a position as much as possible alongside the participants, I wanted to put them at ease and break down some of the researcher/participant barriers that are often created by either respondents or those conducting the study.

In this sense, I wanted to try and avoid some of the issues encountered by Seiter which she recounts in her honest account of an interview which was not as successful as she had hoped (1990). She and her fellow researcher interviewed two older men about soap operas, taking an 'open-ended' approach in order to see what would naturally arise from their thoughts on soap operas with a psychoanalytic approach in the back of her and her fellow researcher's minds. She found that the interview had an 'under-current' which created unease and she argues that this was driven by class and gender differences. For example, she notes how Mr Howe would try to demonstrate 'knowledge' by referring to an understanding of 'secret societies', 'German castles' and 'the military'; these tropes were all designed to impress her and her fellow researcher. She further notes how some of the comments made by both interview subjects Mr Howe and Mr Dubois which set themselves against women were problematic for her and despite her best efforts made her feel uncomfortable and was probably therefore apparent in the under-current of the interview. I should highlight at the point, and ahead of the analysis in the following chapters that despite my efforts to avoid overplaying the role of the researcher, there is evidence in my groups that participants were aware of this dynamic and therefore it must be thought about in relation to the subsequent analyses in the following chapters. For example in the following exchange the participant literally asks me, as the facilitator, whether or not her idea is valid, in that sense surrendering some of her power to me as 'an expert':

Pilot group - Clare: 'Pansexual – I get the feeling they won't stop at fancying members of their own species.'

CH: 'Someone used the word Bisexual earlier?'

Rosie: 'But that doesn't really apply here does it? The characters like Ianto and Tosh who are from here and are as it were normal but then it's kind of centred on Jack – he is kind of anything goes.'

Rosie: 'It's like they have bought this character from the future who has this utopian idea of sexuality- Ianto seems to struggle with it and it doesn't come as easy to him as it does to Jack sort of thing.'

Rosie asks me for permission here to validate her views. Indeed later in the group she notes that she is not explaining something very well, foregrounding what seems to be a concern that somehow I might be examining her and her contributions in this situation. Of course this could also be that in the group situation she feels more self-aware of her performance. It is one of the differences between Seiter's concerns about her troubled interview and my work where there is the dynamic of the group at play as well as the interplay between individuals and myself. Whether it is my power as the researcher, or the power of others as 'observing peers' in the group, it is still a reminder that in the focus group situation there are performances of identity in relation to others, and me as a researcher, which are in Seiter's terms about 'distinction'. In that way it might be judgements of the group members on each other in terms of their cultural or educational capital, but these interplays must be thought about as dynamics which will inevitably create some performances in relation to class or perceived educational differences. I would suggest, however, that while we should be mindful of these performances this is not to suggest that they completely denigrate the idea of the focus group as being able to reflect some kind of social context. While it is a 'constructed' situation these types of judgements are being made day in day out, in everyday life when we gossip at work or when we go to lunch with friends. In that sense, they are part and parcel of the social context of identity. In that way the focus group can be seen as analogous to other social situations.

Seiter also discusses how there were difficult moments in her telephone interview in relation to her interactions with Mr Howe and I want to think about this more closely now in terms of my own research. Issues of sexual orientation can be sensitive for some and I was mindful about this in my study. Indeed, there are a number of instances

where the taboo nature of sexuality brought me into encounters with ethical questions during the facilitation process and I want to highlight and consider these next.

### **Sensitivity and disclosure in audience research**

Two moments, or key points in my research, highlighted the importance of the need to be aware of particular issues that might arise when dealing with topics such as sexuality and gender in audience research. Indeed, a corollary of the gap in audience research addressing sexuality is the lack of methodological experiences that could be passed on to researchers in terms of how to approach sensitive topics in research. With this in mind, this was another element of my research strategy which was iterative, in that I adapted it as my experience of the research was building. Here I also turned to the wider field of focus group research in sociology and feminist studies to consider how to best adapt my research in relation to the issue of sensitivity. I have already discussed how, despite the liberalisation of homosexuality and to a certain extent bisexuality in the UK, I felt uncomfortable trying to ascertain respondents sexual identities in advance so I could 'categorise' them into groups. A key moment where I adapted my research strategy in relation to this was reflecting on the pilot focus group. I had developed a question schedule for the group or set of topics to cover (see appendix one for original focus group agenda) and as part of that I had planned to discuss the *Torchwood* text at length for the first half hour of the group and then focus on how individuals related to the text in terms of their own sexual identities. I had based this approach on the notion that by addressing issues of sexuality in the text for the first part of the group I would be 'warming' the group up and that the group dynamic would have developed to the extent that at this point addressing a more sensitive topic would be easier or less challenging. I introduced the topic, in a way that on reflection might for some respondents seem confrontational, but at that point I believed they would be prepared for it after the in-depth discussions of the liberatory nature of sexuality in *Torchwood*.

Pilot group - CH: 'Ok in the last section of the group I just want to touch a bit on how we define ourselves sexually and you don't have to if you don't to but I



wanted you to talk about how you define yourself sexually and if indeed you do define yourselves in terms of sexual identity at all...'

*Nervous looks from respondents*

Phil: 'Me first , (*embarrassed laughter*) I'm heterosexual I guess but I don't really have a problem defining myself but I don't think you should have to if you don't want to....

CH: do you ever use that label?'

Phil: 'err not really...I don't walk around and say that – maybe this is the first time I ever self –identified...'

The reaction from the group highlights that my approach here was too direct. Up until this point the group had 'flowed', with respondents talking to each other and joking about some of their responses. After my introduction of this topic the dynamic changed to a certain extent where the participants began to only engage with me directly and seemed hesitant to contribute. In some ways it was a useful exercise. As can be seen from the response above, immediately the 'natural' state of heterosexuality is highlighted by Phil, disclosing that he has never self-identified in terms of sexuality because as a heterosexual man there has been no need. On reflection, however, at the end of the group I decided that this approach 'cost' too much in terms of the way it seemed to make the participants feel and the effect it had on the dynamics in the group and the 'flow' of the responses provided which became stilted. Instead, as my own technique in terms of facilitation improved but also my overall approach in terms of planning my focus group agenda, I introduced the topic in a more indirect way. The different effect on the groups can be seen in the following extract from Brighton group two, when I introduced the topic of sexual identity.

Grp 2 CH: 'We're running out of time now so I want to move on a bit and think about how you are relating to the text, if it all in terms of your own sexuality or sexual identity, or you might not feel you have one but did you relate to it did you have any take outs from it?'

Jenny: 'Can I just say I didn't like the combination of sex with violence, it's almost like that's wrong because if there is sex there shouldn't be violence and that upset me a little bit so I wouldn't personally like to watch that again.'

CH: 'So in that way you did relate that to your own sexuality because you thought that's not my sexuality?'

Jenny: 'Yeah the point of sex is that it's not about violence.'

Rich: 'Sex and violence though are all about power and control and the two arousals are quite similar and that's all they were about violence and sex, err I forgot what the question was?'

CH: 'Do you relate to your own sexual identities while watching if all. I'm not saying you did, it might be that you think I don't think much about my own sexual identity or it might make you think differently about it?'

Shane: 'For me I guess as you don't see many gay or homosexual characters on TV so when you see someone who is gay or bisexual you kind of think maybe there will be something that relates to me and after about five minutes I realised oh no this is nothing like me I am not a time traveller I don't treat people in that way.'

While my approach by this point did not yield such direct results in terms of an answer about the individual's sexual identity, the above extract highlights that the flow of group talk was much smoother. While Jenny does not answer the question as I intended it, immediately her fast response in terms of highlighting the close relationship between violence and sexuality in the text for her meant that she had at the very least not felt 'intimidated' by the question. For her the part of her sexual identity foregrounded by the text was that part which identifies with a sensual approach to sexuality, which was not evident (on the whole) in the episode screened. I then clarified my question, and in doing so I started to get responses which related to sexual identity in terms of orientation but it was a more natural flow into this part of the questioning process. In this way, I hopefully achieved a balance that meant that those who wanted to divulge could, and those who prefer to keep some of this

information in the private sphere also could. However, for some the private and public barriers in the focus group were not always easy boundaries to negotiate. This is potentially due to the less natural environment that the group takes place within. I want to consider this now and think about how it can lead to disclosures in a focus group and my own position on the ethics of this in that situation.

## **Disclosure**

...focus group participants themselves sometimes identify the focus group as a special occasion and take the opportunity to discuss issues that are unconsciously censored or simply awkward to raise in more routine settings. In this sense the research session serves as a liminal time and space where the new and unexpected may occur and where novel communication can be achieved. (165)

In the quote above Kitzinger and Farquhar highlight the way the focus group session can become an area for disclosure because subjects are raised that might not be in everyday life (1999). This is certainly the case for one participant in Brighton group one, Robert, who at two key moments in the research made disclosures which he himself then realises are perhaps too personal for discussion in the forum of the focus group. In the following two extracts Robert reveals how he made decisions about his sexual identity but also that his son is dealing with his own issues of sexuality and experience of sexual violence.

### *Extract 1*

Grp 1 - Me: 'so how do you feel about that I mean is it something political for you do you use labels or.'

Chris: 'I know it's fashionable not to reduce yourself to a label but I know a lot of people are more comfortable if they can pigeon hole you and I think some people are anally retentive I identify with women wanting men so I think it is easier for me to say I am attracted to men and I can say I am gay'.

Robert: 'Whether my identity as a heterosexual is political, I am not sure. But of course heterosexuals are a group, and that group has power, and heterosexuals

are a majority. I would have thought it has more power than other groups in that sense it is political. But in the sense it is the subject that is political rather than the individuals in it I am aware at this stage of my life that I could have chosen to go down the route of homosexuality I was at a boarding school where homosexuality was rife and I took part myself sometimes in homosexual acts and I can see the attraction as a choice to go down that road I don't think I am constitutionally able. And I have a son who has a kind of dilemma around that but it's too complicated to explain the whole thing. Ermm the position which society takes on these matters has political consequences or social consequences one should say, and it will have an effect on what choices people make in their lives so in that sense it is political or socio-political it's difficult in a sense everything is political'.

#### *Extract 2*

Robert: I think it has become much more difficult for men who are constitutionally heterosexual to feel confident about their heterosexuality because of the fluidity you are talking about here and again. I see this with my son I can only state it as a belief. I believe my son is not gay and he has a number of psychological problems and it means he has only had brief relationships with women. He is definitely attracted to women in my view but he has come under considerable pressure to declare himself gay and he has also been raped as well which doesn't help. That's another issue I am not trying to bring that in the discussion I think too much fluidity at least the level of social recognition I think there is a distinction of fluidity privately and fluidity as a recognised social thing which we all say is ok. I think the latter is a problem for men and also perhaps women who are unsure themselves who are searching for an identity and what to feel sure about themselves which of course could be a gay or a heterosexual identity. I think that there is a particular problem with heterosexual as it is being attacked from the gay side and from the feminist side men if they are not super confident are not quite sure what to do with themselves.'

CH: 'Yeah and I think that's kind of interesting thinking about sexuality as it has a function thinking arguably particularly for the gay movement it had a function giving gay people a community as of course there was a lot of oppression around gay rights so there is a sort of dilemma really if we move to the fluid side of things that's challenging for people who need the safety and security of identity'

Robert: 'That's what I mean'.

As the extracts show Robert reveals that he made a decision around his sexuality in relation to what was acceptable at the time and implies that he could indeed be homosexual if he wanted to be. While this information did provide some awkwardness in the group, for Robert there seems to be an element of the information almost being disclosed before he had a chance to think about the process. This seems evident in the second extract where he notes 'that's another issue. I am not trying to bring that into the discussion'. By this point Robert clearly felt this was an environment where he would be able to talk about this statement, but he suggests that he is unsure of the boundaries and that potentially outside this environment he would not address these issues at all; he is not practiced at disclosing so seems to find the regulation of the private/public boundary more difficult once he 'opens' up about this topic. In terms of wider issues of ethics it raises the question about how much to probe into these subjects in this situation. As a researcher my reaction was to summarise the point but not pursue some of the content of the feedback, as there would be no appropriate way of facilitating and helping Robert in this context. While this was a difficult moment in the research, rather than suggesting that this should deter media researchers from addressing these kinds of issues I would like to suggest along with Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) that in fact as long as handled appropriately and with safeguards in place these moments of disclosure are paramount in focus group discussions. For the protection of my participants I have ensured that all their contributions are anonymised. Also my research approach and focus group agenda were all reviewed by senior academics at the University of Sussex to ensure that they were appropriate ethically. Furthermore, I highlighted to the participants before they engaged with the research that it was focusing on representation of sexuality on TV,

therefore they at least were prepared for the content of the focus groups and could choose whether they would want to discuss a topic which for some should still stay more in the private realm. As can be seen in chapter's three, and six, as a researcher it would have been easy to characterise Robert as a particular kind of 'straight' man, based on some of his early comments in the group, however, the disclosures made at the end highlighted that the discourses he drew upon to interpret the texts were part of earlier experiences in life and therefore changed my interpretation of Robert's contributions to the group quite considerably. In this way, this moment was significant in the research. If prepared, the researcher then should not feel apprehensive about those moments of disclosure in the research, which as Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) note: 'focus group work suggests the need to relinquish assumptions about divisions such as private and public and to reconnect concepts such as the personal and political. Instead of taking such categories for granted, we need to analyse what these categories mean in any given situation, how they are maintained and how they are challenged and reframed'. In the case of Robert it was this slippage between the private and public which in the end revealed a great deal about the effect of discourses on identity making and therefore had a significant impact on this research. These moments then, formed part of my analytical strategy. Before moving on to discuss the results of my research, I want to be as open about my approach in this respect as possible.

## **Analysis**

My approach to analysis of the transcripts was a hybrid of a number of methods employed by qualitative researchers. Media and Cultural Studies are multidisciplinary fields and as already highlighted the new audience research strand has followed this trend. In this way, it benefits from differing perspectives. Most work in relation to textual analysis and audience research is made up of different methods including ideological analysis, feminist approaches, queer theory, sociological thought, and close textual analysis in the tradition of English literature studies and so on. Therefore in the analysis of my focus groups I too have borrowed from many of these areas tying my

own textual analysis in a queer and feminist<sup>14</sup> mode to interpretations of my participants' contributions; analysing the text through their eyes. At the same time, though, as Austin (1999) notes we cannot always take audience research at face value. In that sense I also deconstruct contributions made by my respondents and interpret what discourses seem evident (or not) in their comments and interactions. Finally, my research also sought to investigate more closely the links between interpretation, meaning making and identity (re)formation/performance. In this way, I also analysed my focus groups from the perspective of where these linkages can be seen using performance theory.

In practical terms, I followed the approach by Thomas (2002) in her audience research regarding feminism and a number of popular TV and radio texts. I adopted stage two of her analysis where she 'annotated the transcript using codes'. Whereas Thomas employed counting techniques, I wanted to avoid this approach, mostly as the objectives of my research focused more on interpretation, meaning making and the content of the group's discourse rather than the quantity of types of discourse in the groups. For example, in group one in Brighton, Robert is the only member of the group to apparently draw on discourses of homophobia and therefore counting the occurrences of this would be fruitless. Instead I wanted to focus on the way discourses were drawn by respondents and how talk around a media text might be seen as part of identity (re)formation and performance. I then followed a rather iterative process where I identified key topics from each group while bearing my research objectives in mind. In this way, I both pulled out information which would be useful to me but I also tried to let the data 'speak to me' in terms of categories or subjects that I had not considered.

In terms of the backgrounds of my participants in relation to their group talk, in practise I was able to utilise the data collected through the consent form much less than I had anticipated. While knowing the sexual orientation of the respondents was useful when analysing their responses and their position or roles in the group dynamics, other indicators such as class proved to be less helpful. On the consent

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<sup>14</sup> As I have highlighted I do not claim to be a feminist, but instead look to, consider and where appropriate apply feminist thought.

form I used a simplistic system of upper, middle and lower class. Although this was crude it was intended to give me an overall picture of the backgrounds of my respondents and if possible help me to think about how issues of class might cut across some of my research objectives in terms of sexuality and gender. However once analysis of the focus group data begun I soon realised that just the topics of sexuality, gender, genre and identity (re)formation and performance would be considerable areas for analysis, not allowing much room for considered thought on the topic of class. Of course, as an element of analysis class is inextricably linked to the experiences of those in my groups and it would be impossible to separate it or suggest that it is not an important area for consideration. However, despite attempts to reach out beyond my own middle-class, university educated social group through recruitment on sites such as [www.tvchat.co.uk](http://www.tvchat.co.uk) and [www.digitalspy.co.uk](http://www.digitalspy.co.uk) which attract a broader audience in terms of social and economic status, due to the use of snowball technique, my groups were mainly made up of middle class participants. In this way, it should be noted that much of the responses in the group will reflect the more liberal middle-class urban situations that the groups became embedded in.

In the following chapters, then, I present my findings through a mixture of the analytical techniques I have outlined so far. When I began to 'read' the data I established that broadly speaking there were three key categories to address; sexuality, gender and genre. In some ways I am looking at a similar picture but from a different perspective in each chapter, interpreting the data with a different lens each time and considering it in relation to relevant theory and previous research in the area. In the last of the results chapters, chapter six, I adopt a different mode. Whereas through the first three chapters I am predominantly interpreting the text alongside my participants, while also deconstructing their contributions where it seems appropriate, in chapter six I move squarely on to looking at the groups as social contexts and consider the respondents and their performances/identity (re)formations in relation to their interpretations and meaning making practices. First, however, as the key driver of this research is to consider interpretations of the fluid sexuality in Torchwood, I start in the next chapter, by addressing the data from that perspective.



### **‘IT’S ABOUT THE SEX ISN’T IT?’: *TORCHWOOD*, SEXUAL REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY/FLUIDITY**

In this chapter I want to focus on the extensive group talk about sexual representation and identity. I want to explore more specifically some key questions which relate to my broader research objective asking how liberatory are fluid sexual representations in *Torchwood*? To do this and to be more precise, in this section of the thesis I want to ask what are my participants’ reflections on the sexual representation in *Torchwood*? Both broadly in terms of sex as a discourse in society, but more specifically in terms of fluidity and how the audience perceives these representations both in relation to societal expectations but also to their own notions of sexual identity. What discourses are (and are not) available to them when considering fluid sexual representation and how can we see these as liberatory (or not)?

The topics of sex, sexuality and sexual identity can be easily conflated. Therefore I discuss focus group talk under several headings in an effort<sup>15</sup> to differentiate between them; firstly themes more broadly around sex in general, secondly, freedom from heteronormative ideas of sex and then freedom from sexual identity. Then I consider ways that the focus group participants found some of the sexual representations problematic. In the final part of the chapter I consider how participants were also keen either overtly or more indirectly through their discourse to communicate the importance of sexual identity in relation to security and emotions. I argue through focus group talk, combined with textual analysis, that ostensibly *Torchwood* is a show that liberates through fluid sexual representation. Indeed, I suggest that the representations on offer are more complex than some of the reductive mainstream media reports of the show would allow. However, I also suggest that heterosexuality and fluid sexuality are positioned in problematic ways by the series through a human/alien (monster) binary. Furthermore I suggest that discourses of

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<sup>15</sup> There is inevitably slippage between these terms; for example heteronormative ideas of sex could also be seen as relating to sexual labelling.

homonormativity and heteronormativity are evident in focus group talk about the series reminding us that the language of labelling and classification provide both comfort and restrictions for those articulating them. This I suggest points towards the need for an 'as complex' as possible consideration of identity in relation to current often dichotomised debates around a sexual fluid vs. identity binary.

## Sex

Sex was seen as a key theme of *Torchwood* by the focus group participants. The quote that makes up the title for this chapter is taken from the part of my focus groups where I asked what were the key themes of the episode screened. Before in-depth discussion about sexuality had occurred four of the five focus groups identified that sex stood out for them and that *Torchwood* was therefore an adult show or an 'adult' version of *Doctor Who*.

Pilot – Gillian: 'there is quite a lot of sex or references to sex. I think it was only the second episode that was the alien sex gas one. They were quite keen early on to establish that it was for a much more adult audience'.

Grp 1 – Rich: 'I thought it was really, well very sexually charged...'

Grp 3 – Greg: 'Yeah well it was definitely ... I mean at the time it was advertised as being the kind of adult oriented *Doctor Who*'.

Grp 4 – Debbie: 'Because there is sex and there is sexuality in *Torchwood* and there is none of that in *Doctor Who*. I mean maybe the last series kind of had pregnancies things like this but really I think *Torchwood* was ... it felt more adult in that sense (Louise nods to indicate her agreement) and I don't think adult is the right word but it had a sense of ... I connected with *Torchwood* at a different level than with *Doctor Who* so I'm a great fan of both of them it was a personal connection with *Doctor Who*, no sorry with *Torchwood*...'

It soon became clear when exploring the topic of sex with the groups that there were more general elements of the representations of sex and relationships<sup>16</sup> that are worthy of consideration which I want to explore in the next few sections of this chapter.

### **Sexual liberation and freedom from emotions**

For many in the groups the foregrounding of sexual desire as something separate from relationships or emotionality in the episode aired offered some freedom:

Pilot - Rosie: 'Yeah it's shaggin...yer...errr...it's not about the sexuality it's about the sex'.

Grp 1 - Chris: 'for the erotic desire to be foregrounded was something I could totally relate to and that was wonderfully refreshing'.

In this way, the respondents are suggesting that it offers liberation from issues of sexual orientation but also that the show generally foregrounds erotic desire and they find that liberating too. Others made similar comments:

Pilot - Nigel: 'I liked how it bought in the sexual undertone because you never really see that really as explicitly as it was there'.

Ruth - 'I think the emphasis seems to be more on the flirtation than it is on the relationships...so you don't have to deal with the mental repercussions of it, or the emotional repercussions, it is sort of separated...sex is a fun activity from being in a relationship...so if you sleep with someone of the same sex some time it doesn't matter that's just sex...'

The theme of sexual liberation from emotional issues was marked in heterosexual respondents (those that I had identified). This element of the research surprised me; that heterosexual respondents whom could be seen to have a more accepted sexual identity should enjoy sexual liberation to such an extent. As Fuss notes the conceptualisation of desire is often through attraction to the different but desired

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<sup>16</sup> Although of course these are often heteronormative and in that sense arguably oppressive for some - an issue which I will address.

other, making desire 'the province and privilege of heterosexuals' (1993: 63). Despite this 'privilege' heteronormative discourses around sex position it within the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990: 173) which of course also include discourses of romance, marriage and monogamy. Jackson in her work on heterosexuality highlights the power of discourses of emotion with regards to sex in society and their links to heterosexuality:

The cultural construction of romantic love is many layered. Its most superficial elements, those most amenable to challenge and change, are such romantic conventions as the celebration of Valentine's day, gift of red roses or candlelit dinners. These are customs of recent origin by no means essential to the experience of love. More fundamental is the link between love and 'compulsory heterosexuality' (1999: 101).

In this way, we can say that love is often seen as the mainstay of heterosexuality. While it can be problematic for those outside heterosexuality it can also be restricting for those who self-identify as straight or heterosexual. The discourse of heterosexual sex as preferred within relationships or emotion must be powerful if depictions of sex which is more independent of emotional relationships offer this degree of liberation. While the series seemed to offer sexual liberation on a general level it also offered liberation from heteronormative discourses.

### **Heteronormative liberation**

The groups on the whole agreed that the show offered a degree of liberation from heteronormative ideas of sexuality.

Pilot - Nigel: 'It's very progressive'.

Grp1 – Julie: 'I thought it was quite refreshing to see that portrayal of sexuality and identity it just felt it was a bit contrary to the norm to how it is often portrayed in the media , it just felt as if it was a good angle it was just refreshing or something different it felt as if it moved away from this thing of heteronormativity'.

Pilot – Nigel: ‘But it was really nice to see the two fellas at the bar kissing cos you just don’t see that a lot’.

This discussion was continued by two members of group one who started to debate the significance of foregrounding alternative sexualities on TV:

Grp1 – Chris: ‘But it’s wonderful how the homoeroticism is foregrounded and any more heteronormative relationships are side lined to brief cameos and there’s a sort of reversal of the norm’

Robert: ‘but can I just ask why (to Chris) because it’s not normally done’?

Chris: ‘Because it’s refreshing to see (looks directly at Robert defiantly)’.

Robert: ‘refreshing in what sense’?

Chris: ‘because the majority of television is heterocentrist so therefore you see it from the heterosexual point of view and the gay characters are usually sidelined to one of the supporting roles the gay best friend for example in the best friend’s wedding (a reference to the film *‘My Best Friend’s Wedding’* 1997) we’re always sidelined to a supporting role unless it’s a gay or lesbian film particularly in television as well I remember in 1985 when Colin and his barrow boy boyfriend kissed there was uproar (a reference to BBC’s *Eastenders* (1985-) – the whole nation was up in arms it’s the end of the world so to see this on television is wonderful’.

Robert: ‘yes ok’. (he nods)

I discuss in chapter four how Robert’s experience of the text seems to be seen through elements of his identity as a self-identified (currently) heterosexual man and as a father. However, here I want to focus on the issues of representation raised by the two respondents. They and respondents mentioned from previous groups (indeed the majority of respondents made similar comments) highlight that the show offers freedoms from existing representations of sexuality in the media, that are seen as progressive and moving away from heteronormativity. This reminds us of the relatively poor representation of both bisexuality and fluid sexuality on British TV

screens. As one respondent notes 'we're (meaning gay people or queers) are often sidelined'. Furthermore despite an increase in the number of representations of unlabelled 'queer' characters they are still the exception to the rule.

However, the slow development of queer representations on TV and the importance of increasing their presence is highlighted by other comments made by one of my participants:

Gp 1 - Robert: 'I can't say I was very comfortable, I accept that people are gay and some are not and that there are a wide range of sexualities but I don't particularly like watching homosexual acts'.

Rose: *looks down*

CH: 'Ok.'

Chris : *raises eyebrow*

Robert: 'or behaviour'.

CH: 'Ok.'

Robert: 'So yes that's what I suppose what I would say'.

Robert: 'yes to add to that I should say I also find heterosexual sex beyond a certain point really uncomfortable so I should say that'.

CH: 'So would you say that you would find anything with sexual themes difficult?'

Robert: 'Yes I haven't thought that through but I would say there is something s with sexual themes that I wouldn't find difficult but I did find that difficult'.

In this way, we are reminded of the subversive nature of some homophobia which masquerades as acceptance but stops short of embracing homosexuality as demonstrated by Robert's comment: 'I don't particularly like watching homosexual

acts'. It is a reminder that Butler's call for subversive performances<sup>17</sup> of gender and sexuality, to make the heterosexual matrix unstable (1990) still seems relevant when we consider how some participants relate to the representations in *Torchwood*. But not only is the presence of these disruptive sexualities important but also their quality or content. As Davis and Dickenson note the gay character is usually 'coming out' or dealing with the issues of sexuality (2004) – this is certainly the case in some of the most prominent TV series in the UK such as *Coronation Street* (1964-) and *Eastenders* (1985-) where even now the gay characters are identified as gay. Indeed respondents in the pilot group highlighted that the show's approach to sexuality as less about 'issues' was refreshing:

Pilot - Martha: 'There isn't an issue kind of thing'.

Rich: 'But it isn't really how it is though...it's still kind of a fantasy'.

Louise: 'I suppose but I guess because they are all adults they have got to know what they like so they have got past the stage of its issues all the time, they are in a relatively issue free place, maybe the issues will come up in the future'.

Rich: 'You get tired with those shows that deal with the issues all the time'.

Rosie: 'I think *Torchwood* is doing a similar sort of thing(to Star Trek in the 60s) it's pushing the boundaries, it's kind of showing things that other shows are not showing or if they do show it they are showing it as an issues – 'he's struggling with being gay'.

This is an important distinction. It's a reminder that the sexual representation in *Torchwood* is arguably more than gay or bisexual representation but is one that holds on to the uncertainty or fluidity of identity which seems to be so evident in much of our lives. Our identities shift as we get older or change jobs and while we may fetishise parts of our sexual identity based on experience it seems reasonable that this could and can shift and change too. Whereas once media representations of

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<sup>17</sup> Butler has highlighted since that she refers to performance not in a theatrical sense but in the more subtle notion of a self-awareness of the acts of gender and sexuality – an undoing of the potential unconsciousness that she envisions being an outcome of the repetitive nature of gender performances in society (1996).

sexuality were often about closure – closing down sexual options through the narrative – becoming gay or being a closet gay, Russell T. Davies and the *Torchwood* production team seem to be trying to keep these options open. The expression of, and liberation from, sexual identities was something that many participants commented on and considered to be a positive contribution of the series, something I want to explore further in the following section.

### **Sexual identity liberation**

Respondents commented specifically on the idea of fluid sexual identity:

Pilot – Rosie: ‘I found it kind of awesome is the best word I can think of cos it showed this image of sexuality that wasn’t about boxes ...and actually *Torchwood* is really silly and I don’t think I had seen anything apart from maybe queer as folk but that was quite so issuesy, but I don’t think I had seen anything with that idea of sexuality in it...but mainly it was about Welsh people jumping out of ...and John Barrowman’s terrible terrible acting... (Shauna does John Barrowman impression)’.

Grp1 - Julie: ‘I thought it was quite refreshing to see that portrayal of sexuality and identity it just felt it was a bit contrary to the norm to how it is often portrayed in the media, it just felt as if it was a good angle it was just refreshing or something different it felt as if it moved away from this thing of heteronormativity’.

The characters in *Torchwood* are rarely labelled sexually in the series (although this happens more in season 3 and 4). Indeed when prompted none of the respondents in the groups interpreted a classification of sexual identity in the text either (that is they could not remember it being classified by the narrative). This is in contrast to the way the media reported the show. For example, *The Sun* in their news item about the launch of the series published the headline ‘Dr Ooh Gets Four Gay Pals’ quickly followed by the opening paragraph reading ‘Gay *Doctor Who* star John Barrowman.... gets bisexual assistants’. Firstly conflating the terms gay and bisexual by first defining them as gay then bisexual but also failing to capture the fluid representation of these



characters and highlighting John Barrowman's sexuality which of course is different extra-diegetically to his character's<sup>18</sup>. While this is progressive in the sense that bisexuality gets a mention the paper still felt the need to frame as well as confuse the sexualities. Syntactically this also organises bisexuality into a secondary position to the more senior 'gay' John Barrowman who is leading his bisexual assistants (well bisexual at least with aliens). The piece also further simplifies the fluid representation, or multiple sexual representations in the series, by commenting that there will be 'lesbian romps' with no mention of the male homosexual 'action'.

Charlie Brooker also could not resist positioning the show's sexuality and further deriding it. In a Guardian article he comments on the sexuality in his review of the show:

'And on top of all that, there's a bizarre emphasis on bisexual tension thrown in for good measure. You half expect the *Torchwood* gang to drop their slacks and form a humping great daisy chain any moment. It's Shortbus meets Goober and the Ghost Chasers meets X-Men meets Angel meets The Tomorrow People meets Spooks meets Oh God I Give Up'.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, while again at least mentioning bisexuality he suggests it is 'bizarre' and frames the show's sexual representations with a label. Also through his reference to the mixture of genres utilised in the show seems to suggest that the show, and by extension, its bisexual characters can't make up their minds. The media and the influence of its discourse around the show's stars can arguably also be seen in the following comments:

Grp2 - Jenny: 'I thought he was actually gay like I didn't think, I thought he was playing up to the whole thing – like give her a cuddle and be romantic but I just thought he was gay'.

Grp2 - Harry: 'I thought he was before hand as well before I knew anything about it'.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/tv/article64139.ece> - accessed 22nd June 2011.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/oct/28/tvandradio.broadcasting> - accessed 4th July 2011.

Pilot - Rich: '....the fact that Russell T. Davis is writing it everyone knows what to expect and that John Barrowman is playing a gay guy, it's really easy for him to do that. It's safe. There isn't going to be a backlash on fan sites'.

In this way, media discourse circulating around John Barrowman and his sexuality seem to be part and parcel of how the respondents are reading Captain Jack's sexuality. As well as furthering my argument that this is part of the media's positioning of the show as lead by 'gay' John Barrowman it also shines a light on notions of stardom and the interplay between it and narratives. As Geraghty notes in her examination of stardom: 'the term celebrity indicates someone whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside their sphere of work and who is famous for having a lifestyle' (2007: 187). John Barrowman is a publically gay actor. Although not a well-known film or TV star before *Doctor Who* he was an established actor nominated for the Laurence Olivier best actor in a musical award 1998 for his performance in *'The Fix'*<sup>20</sup> (1997) and appearing in the remake of *The Producers* (2005) as a Nazi officer in the camp musical within a musical 'Springtime for Hitler'; all these elements adding to his camp or gay extra-textual persona. While it is hard to argue that John Barrowman was chosen for the role as Captain Jack in *Torchwood* for his sexuality as he did play the character in *Doctor Who* – there seems little doubt that his extra-textual sexuality adds to the sexual ambiguity of his character in the series and it seems the way that my participants read his character. For example, Phil makes specific reference to John Barrowman in the focus group based on his extra-diegetic sexuality. He classifies him as gay despite the group conversation focusing on his fluid sexuality in the show potentially further revealing the power of the media to drive the engine of sexual classification, and more generally the power of homonormative and heteronormative discourses. John Barrowman's extra-diegetic sexuality almost gives Phil a discursive excuse to use this label for Captain Jack. In production terms whether or not John Barrowman was chosen partly due to his sexuality it can be argued that Russell T. Davies took an easier sexual trajectory by choosing John Barrowman to be his leading protagonist. His bisexuality was extra-textual homosexuality becoming diegetic

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0057882/bio> - accessed 4th July 2011.

bisexuality; an easier sexual move to make than from heterosexual male to bisexual male.

Russell T. Davies aspirations, then, to offer fluid sexual representations were immediately hampered by media reports from both sides of the political spectrum. It is interesting that despite several attempts to probe my participants for how they would define the sexuality in the show on the whole the participants resisted offering a label for the representations of sexuality on offer (although they did use labels – an inconsistency in terms of discourses of labelling which I will discuss later). And yet if a viewer had heard about the show through the media they would have been given several sexual labels before even switching on the TV set. That is not to say that as a viewer you could not read the show differently, but it certainly reduces the chances of a more open reading.

While on the whole my respondents were positive about the shows ambitions to represent fluid sexuality they were critical about other elements of both the representation of sex and sexualities. I want to explore this further in the forthcoming sections. I argue through focus group findings and textual analysis, that despite its ambitions the productions teams' representation of sex generally and in relation to more particular sexualities such as heterosexuality and bisexuality, is in many ways problematic. Firstly I want to think about more general depictions of sex in the series; there was considerable group talk about the way the series juxtaposed sex and violence and I want to consider this in the next section.

### **Sex and violence**

Respondents commented in all focus groups on one particular scene in the episode screened in relation to the juxtaposition of sex and violence. The topic generated interest and interpretation from participants making it important to discuss:

Grp2 - Rich: 'I thought it was really well very sexually charged but also really violent too I think it was quite interesting how those things were running parallel to each other in the programme it reminded me of relationships

between people that co-dependency people have on each other domestic violence and so on and I can't really unpick all that in my head properly'.

Grp2 - Jenny: 'yer sex and violence'.

Grp2 - Adam: 'yer I didn't like that bit'.

Indeed the scene referred to is particularly visceral; the title of the episode screened (*Kiss, kiss, bang bang*) is literally played out in the diegesis when Captain Jack and John meet and 'kiss, kiss' and then through violence 'bang, bang'. The scene depicts Captains Jack and John being reunited in a bar (named 'The Reunion' to frame the scene from the start) and pivots on a soft/hard, love/hate binary through a stand-off dual (guns at the ready). The dual quickly turns into a kissing scene and then pivots back into a bar brawl fighting scene with the pop band Blur's *Song 2* (1997) being played non-diegetically timed to coincide and musically mark the start and end of the fight sequence (the non-diegetic element signalling that this is a self-conscious narrative device). Of course this scene focuses on two fluid sexual men (or in fact aliens as I later discuss in this chapter). It will be difficult to separate issues of gender from sexuality, however, here I attempt to analyse from a sexual point of view, addressing the scene from a gender (and indeed genre) perspective in later chapters.

There are a number of ways of reading this sub-plot which are reflected in the responses from my participants. For example one participant interpreted this scene as a way of circumnavigating depictions of hardcore sex.

Grp4 – Debbie: '...but it's a very sexual moment there when they are ... John, Captain John and Captain Jack are kind of facing, there's this fire behind them, and they kiss and then they fight which is of course ... for me that's sex but they cannot show it so they want to make it a fight, it's a kind of recourse for you, two men, they cannot so I think they've made it a fight. (laughter)'.

For Debbie the violent 'bangs' we see are in fact the overt textual version of a sub textual 'sexual bang', but one that is more acceptable and palatable to the audience. However, *Torchwood* has not been shy to depict more explicit sexual scenes (for example the sex scene in the club in Series one episode two 'Day One' where a male

and a female clubber have sex in the toilets) and while this might not allow for a 'harder' more visceral type of sex it would seem reasonable to suggest that if the production team had wanted to depict more romance/sexual action they would have done<sup>21</sup>. Debbie also hints at another reading here which I want to argue seems more likely. She goes on to suggest that 'they cannot', as if to suggest that they cannot show the sex because they are men rather than because it is a sexual scene. While it is unlikely that this is related to the homosexual aspect knowing Russell T. Davies' TV track record (*Queer as Folk*, 1999), and the inclusion of overtly gay male sexual scenes at other points in the series, perhaps this is an expression of a much more fundamental dynamic which has arguably been operating sub-textually in film and TV for some time; that which Sedgwick has termed the "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual'. She notes how this 'seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men.'" (Sedgwick, 1985: 2). Sedgwick, through her consideration of male characters in literature, highlights the 'dialectic of the homosocial/homosexual' suggesting that homophobia is a 'control' mechanism right across the range of male social bonds and that women are less subject to this type of control; friendship can be seen as just that for women. Arguably Russell T. Davies is expressing the homosocial/homosexual tension through this scene. Indeed, in some ways this scene could be seen as Russell T. Davies exorcising the unsaid spectre of homosexuality which has been haunting men in film and TV since its early days. For example, Studlar notes the sub-textual homoerotic desire expressed in early gangster movies (2005), or as Derosia (2003) suggests the comparison of the more erotic male to male violence expressed in *Clockwork Orange* (1971) versus the less fetishised male to female rape/sex scenes. In this way, the motif of violence as a form of male bonding verging on the sexual starting as actual sex (or a kiss in the case of Jack and John), and then becoming male kinship (designated through the sharing of whisky after the scenes of violence) can be seen as an overt textual expression of the full homosocial spectrum that Sedgwick hypothesised exists but is often repressed through homophobia. It is just possible that

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<sup>21</sup> The series had at this point moved to BBC Two which could have had some influence on whether sex was screened but it seems unlikely as BBC Two is known for airing sexually explicit programming after 9pm when *Torchwood* was still being broadcast at this time.

the palpable tension I felt from my respondents regarding these scenes might be related to their seeing this full range of desire which is so rarely seen in this format in filmic and TV texts.

Of course, there are also the uncomfortable connotations of a violent form of sex represented here, echoing the concerns of many feminist writers about pornography. While it is two men here, a gender dynamic has been invoked in the episode (a discussion about who was the wife in their past relationship), arguably meaning that we could read these two as a heterosexual couple and a couple who are having violent sex. In this way, we could say this is a reproduction of the sexual dynamics portrayed in straight (and much gay male) porn, that 'represents women (*or passive men*) as objects who love to be abused, and teaches men practices of degradation and abuse to carry out upon women' (Everywoman, 1988)(my italics). It would seem this is the case for several respondents, in particular for Rich the respondent mentioned above, who then frames this type of dynamic through the idea of domestic violence. Indeed, the notion of an active/passive power dynamic and how that is played out through this scene and elsewhere was also highlighted by respondents.

Grp 3 – Debbie - 'I love that kind of tension someone who is subordinate and someone who is not and I thought that had a kinky element to it...'

The search for dominance between these two characters (and others in fact Debbie is referring the dynamic between Jack and Ianto here), does indeed seem to be a key trope of the show. There are two elements to this worthy of consideration. First, that there is a potential that this could be reflecting back to the audience ideas of slash fiction where this active/passive dynamic is often present even if often made subversive through unconventional twists (i.e. *Star Trek's* [1966-1969] Spock dominates Kirk). And second, whether or not there is a science fiction self-referential element to this in terms of the slash fiction, this dynamic is a foundation of heteronormative ideas of sex which is still maintained by the male (dominant and active)/female (passive and dominated) ideas of sex present both overtly and pervasively in society. All in all, using violence as a driver seems to have made many participants uncomfortable and I would argue does so by relying on more conventional

tropes of dominance and subordination; ideas that from a Freudian point of view and as Debbie highlights can offer pleasure. This can be seen in another participant's comments:

Pilot – Geri: 'At first I was discouraged by the film it seemed to be one of those shows with aliens flying around – but then I thought it was really interesting this scene with these two guys walking towards each other as if they were going to shoot each other and then they kissed I thought it was really cool. I thought it was really cool how they brought sexuality and violence together in that scene and then like it was a family but everyone was attracted to each other'.

Perhaps we should not be surprised at the invocation of these dynamics. They are linked to sub-conscious and alluring sexual drives which Butler tells us are about the reiterated performances of gender we have come to take for granted (1990). In this way, they have an ability to offer pleasure, entertainment and better ratings. However, we should be critical if the portrayal of these dynamics adds further to the action replay of sexuality that only serves to reinforce heteronormative discourses and in particular ones of violence. If violence here seems to reinforce notions of heteronormativity, how then is the heterosexuality more broadly represented in the text? While on the whole *Torchwood* attempts to remain fluid in its representations of sexuality, there are a number of exceptions and respondents in my groups expressed concern at the quality of overt representations of heterosexuality and also at the inferences about heterosexuality made by fluid or bisexual representation.

### **Boring Heterosexuality**

Heterosexuality is often seen as the 'default' sexuality; one that does not stand out or need definition. Richardson in her work on *'Theorising Heterosexuality'* reminds us that 'heterosexuality is rarely acknowledged, or even less likely problematised' (1996). Some of the respondents commented on its representation in *Torchwood* during the focus groups:

Grp 2 - Harry : 'I think that's quite an interesting scene that it's like everything else is queer except this guy who is stuck at home who is a presumably heterosexual white male who isn't involved in this sort of pansexual miasma of special effects that's going on in his wife's life you know, so in a way I think that's an important or key scene, and so maybe people can relate to that that's me the guy in kitchen'.

Grp2 - Ben: ...'I certainly wouldn't want to be portrayed as a boring straight person, they're the boring people (he points)...

Grp 2 – Shane: 'the ones who are definitely straight or gay are the ones who are a bit boring and pedestrian'.

Rhys, the character discussed here, is depicted as one of the only more prominent heterosexual characters in the show. In fact he is positioned next to Gwen through their engagement and marriage . Gwen is shown as fluid sexually through lesbian (albeit alien lesbian, a point which I will return to) and straight experiences making Rhys seem even more like the 'boring guy'. He is often seen in the home. In this way, the representation of heterosexuality in *Torchwood* could be seen as being safe through the metaphor of staying at home.

There are two important facets to this insight. First, from a production point of view the respondent is pointing towards what Austin (1999) described (in relation to film but it still seems applicable here) as the dispersible text – the text that can be read by various audiences to keep sales or in this case ratings up. I will return to this concept in the chapter regarding genre, however at this point it is worth noting the intersection here between generic hybridity and what could be called 'narrative sexual hybridity'. By this I mean that the straight character in the show, while positioned as 'boring', might also be seen as important in order that the straight male in the TV audience, goaded to watch the show by his girlfriend, can still watch *Torchwood* – he has a character to identify with. He is the guy staying at home physically but also metaphorically while his girlfriend enjoys a fluid sexual ride. Indeed there is the potential many women and men who are less sexually fluid or adventurous will be this 'guy at home' keeping the text 'dispersible and open'. So while we could say that



generic hybridity works to include various members of the audience, there could also be a need for narrative sexual hybridity for the same reason.

Secondly, there is also an element of heterosexuality being positioned by the show as a less attractive sexuality<sup>22</sup>. As Harry suggests he sees Rhys as a 'heterosexual male who is not involved in the 'pansexual miasma of special effects' that the other characters are implicated in (particularly in episode one of season two shown to the focus group participants). Ben further elucidates this point suggesting that the show depicts heterosexuality as boring. Academics (Jackson, 1999 and Smart 1996) have noted how heterosexuality has been dealt with by queer theorists and feminists and the tendency for heterosexuality to also be positioned as 'boring' or against the 'diversity' of the other sexualities. Jackson makes an important distinction which is useful for this analysis. She argues that when considering heteronormativity or the institutions of heterosexuality such as marriage we can think about this as a unitary concept but when we consider identities, practices and experiences of heterosexuality we should be careful to remember its diversity (1999). In this way, politically we can hold heteronormative institutions to account without generalising about the subjectivities of heterosexualities. My point in all of this in relation to the heterosexual representations and audience talk around them, is that potentially Russell T. Davies and the *Torchwood* production team are representing subjective heterosexuality in this monolithic sense here and the audience in terms of my focus groups at least seem to have noticed. This idea of sexuality as relating to a quality, or one type of sexuality being positioned as more exciting or acceptable than another, was reflected in other comments in the focus groups. In the next two sections I want to discuss how some respondents articulated what they interpreted as representations of bisexuality.

### **Crazy bisexuality**

For some respondents the depiction of bisexuality was problematic in that it gave license for the characters to be portrayed as without morals.

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<sup>22</sup> At least in the first two seasons where Rhys, one of the only non-fluid sexual characters in the show has only small cameo scenes as opposed to the third season where his character is ascribed a more leading role.

Grp2 – Shane: ‘....they all want a relationship with Jack whereas he is a bisexual and can sleep with anyone suggesting they are all crazy people and don’t give a shit about feelings they just want to fuck anything....’

Gp2 Harry: ....as you said if it was a representation of a heterosexual he would be horrible – I don’t know whether it’s preconceptions but it’s like he is a little bit bi he’ll be alright really’

In this way, for many respondents bisexuality is being represented particularly through the character of Captain Jack Harkness. Of course the text itself does not define Jack as bisexual but does depict him as flirting or being romantically involved with both sexes therefore for these respondents they have read the representation as bisexual. This perhaps reflects what has been identified as a problem of representing bisexuality itself – that it often just isn’t represented. As Barker et al note in their review of bisexuality in the British media, mostly there aren’t any representations of bisexuality but when there are they are usually redefined as either gay or straight (2008).

Despite the taboo of bisexuality reflected in continuing media denial, in the last ten years or so there are indeed more and more TV texts with bisexual representations on British screens. These include *Skins* (2007), *Hollyoaks in the City*, *Kath and Kim* (2002-), *Coupling* (2000-2004) and *Metrosexuality* (1999). In the same way as Shane suggests that *Torchwood* represents bisexuality as crazy, Barker et al note that Jane in the BBC2 series *Coupling* is bisexual but depicted as mad. Academics (Barker et al, 2008, Dollimore, (1997) also highlight that bisexuality is often associated with being ‘promiscuous’. Focus group respondents also suggested this in terms of *Torchwood*:

Grp2 – Shane: ‘...the whole message was sex is fine and you can sleep with as many people as possible because otherwise you are going to be like humans who are boring limp and even if you’re having sex with only women or only men which I didn’t like it as just shag shag shag all the way through...’

Grp 2 – Ben: ‘it seemed very transient all the way through because nothing was allowed to develop be it a relationship or the way people were sexually it just seemed very very transient from one to another to another no stability or...’

Whether or not we read *Torchwood* as bisexual (and this is questionable as this label is never used) the text does seem to suggest that sexual fluidity equates to promiscuity or as Ben suggests sex which is very transient. Some respondents interpreted the bisexuality as being related to the origins of the characters, a narrative element I want to now discuss further.

### **Alien bisexuality**

Other respondents read the bisexuality in the series as 'alien':

Grp 2 - Sue: 'I had that thought as well because Captain Jack I think or I heard from somewhere is an alien and so it's just another exotic alien thing about him maybe we don't read him as bisexual because he is not really human so...'

Grp 2 - Shane: 'it would be better if it was just a bit more believable – ok so one of them is an alien so what am I expecting but...to me I also find some of it a little bit offensive because the humans are all sensitive'

In the second quote, Shane suggests that the text dichotomises the sexuality of the characters between 'sensitive' humans and the bisexual 'other' which for him is Jack. Indeed, in the episode screened the two 'alien' leads Captain Jack and Captain John are both the main protagonists sexually with the majority of sexual action and dialogue. In the rest of the series the 'human' team members do have bisexual experiences, however they are always with aliens – Toshi and Gwen both kiss alien women but only have affairs with male team members not each other. This also highlights the way lesbianism is sidelined by the show if we argue that Gwen as a leading protagonist never has a human to human lesbian experience whereas Jack has human and alien bisexual experiences. In this way, then, none of the 'human' cast actually have alternative sexual experiences with each other – only heterosexual ones. Despite their human appearance, it is worth questioning to what extent Captain Jack and John are positioned as 'alien'. Graham's thoughts on the role of monsters in popular culture and science fiction are useful here. In her book representations of the post/human she considers the role of the monster in science fiction arguing that:

‘Monstrous creatures everywhere invite us to entertain what I will term ‘fabulations’ about the interrelationships of humans, artefacts, machines and animals in which the naturalism and inevitability of axiomatic concepts of ‘human nature’ are deconstructed’. (Graham, 2002:39)

In what ways, then, are the characters in *Torchwood* positioned as monstrous. Captain Jack’s immortality is evinced through his brutal ostensible death when thrown off a building and landing on a stone bench, his body spread across the bench face up back clearly broken, only to be resurrected hours later to save his *Torchwood* human team. His monstrosity is heightened by mystery, with the cast all debating who he is and where he comes from. He is also positioned as inhuman and without emotions through his ability to leave the *Torchwood* team (for *Doctor Who*) and come back. Captain John’s monstrosity is rooted in his murderous tendencies demonstrated by his killing an innocent man brutally (also by throwing him off a roof) as soon as he arrives on earth. Then he callously takes down each of the human *Torchwood* team one by one before attempting to murder his monstrous ex-partner Captain Jack.

Graham notes in her consideration of the monstrous in popular culture: ‘metaphors of doubling and mirroring do feature in many of the mythical and fictional representations of post/humanity’ (2002: 39). To think about this more precisely, we can consider the unstable mirror or doubling images used in many science fiction and fantasy films. For example, in the post-apocalyptic Hollywood action movie *The Matrix* (1999), the transition to the real but much more horrific world that Neo returns to is partly denoted by the motif of the mirror, but not a true mirror (or perfect reflection); it becomes fluid as Neo puts his hand into it after taking the red pill to transition from the virtual to the real world. Or more recently, the doubling of the astronaut character Sam Bell in the science fiction film *Moon* (2009), where the two clones are the same yet different due to their ‘birth’ dates, but their doubling is used as a metaphor for a monstrous vision of the future. Sam’s future as a clone that will die within the specified three years – but also earth’s future where we can be cloned and our clone dupes can be used again and again without consequence. ‘Doubling’ and the metaphor of the imperfect mirror image are often therefore related to the alien or monstrous.

The Captain Jack and Captain John characters in some ways are doubles or 'not-quite' mirror images of each other. The narrative tells us that they were sexual partners as well as partners at work in the 'time agency'. Also through the use of comedic dialogue they are further 'doubled' by an argument in the narrative about which one was the wife in the relationship (a quip that all at once heteronormalises the pair and suggests a devalued role to whoever ends up being the wife). The image below shows how they are also both dressed in historic yet symbolically camp clothing in a visual 'doubling'.



Source: <http://cdn.everyjoe.com/files/2008/03/Torchwood-marsters-10.jpg> - accessed 28th June 2011.

Captain Jack in World War Two military clothing; a trope of both masculinity and then subsequently more recently associated with 'military' fashion in gay culture. Captain John similarly dressed in clothing reminiscent of the Napoleonic French military but also emulating the style and campy of Adam Ant and the new romantic movement of the 1980s. In this way, denoted through clothing, the connotation is that they are different but the same; both camp warriors and in that way the same, but denoted as different through the military trope of different time zones.

The monster metaphor certainly seems to be at work here. Even the names Captain John Hart and Captain Jack Harkness are similar, with first and last name alliteration, yet still slightly different. The narrative of *Torchwood* for the episode screened would also seem to play into the monster motif if we consider the following quote by Cohen regarding the role of the monstrous character:

Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge – and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perceptions of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them.

(1996: 12)

Captain Jack and John are both monsters who have been 'away' literally to the edge of the universe as Captain Jack tells us While Captain John comes from a distant part of time and space. Furthermore as Cohen suggests above monsters ask us how we perceive the world. In the diegesis Captain John literally asks the *Torchwood* team about their 'quaint little classifications' referring to sexual labels suggesting that they are outdated. Indeed one focus group respondent related the 'super-human' (monstrous) nature of Captain Jack and John to their sexuality.

Grp 1 - Chris: 'and it seemed to be related them being super human as well because one is immortal and the other one is able to come and go through time and it seemed to enhance their seeming immortality because they were attracted to all sexes'.

Other respondents also discursively construct monstrous ideas of Captain Jack or Captain John in relation to sexuality or relationships. When asked what a key theme of the show was one respondent quickly suggested it was about:

Grp4 – Gemma: 'Fancying a bad boy'.

And when probed suggested it was about: 'those destructive relationships isn't it'.

And when pushed again about who she is referring to, she clarifies: 'As in the relationship between the two of them'. (Captain's Jack and John)

In this way, the respondent sees John as the monstrous bad boy and the pair as 'destructive'. This I would argue problematises the representation of fluid sexuality to a certain extent. It creates a human/alien (monster) binary which seems to allocate fluid sexuality and lack of emotion to alien/monster and sensitivity/less fluid sexuality to human. Nevertheless, while perhaps creating a false dichotomy in sexual terms as Graham also notes: 'Monsters have a double function... simultaneously marking the boundaries between the normal and the pathological but also exposing the fragility of the very taken-for-grantedness of such categories.' (Graham, 2002:39). Monsters have an awe-inspiring quality, our preoccupation with them is evident in their filmic history from *Dracula*, (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *King Kong* (1933), *Godzilla* (1954) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and as early film monsters to more recent reinventions of the monstrous in *Jurassic Park* (1993), *King Kong* (2005) and *Cloverfield* (2008) . This in itself makes the representation of the monstrous useful in that they draw our attention. This is further exemplified by one of the respondent's comments in terms of the way they interpreted Captain Jack as a sexual leader for those in the narrative but by default possibly for those viewing the text:

Pilot - Louise: 'I think it's like what Rosie said earlier he (captain jack) is representing what you can be like and the others sort of go along with that'.

In this way, Russell T.Davies was perhaps borrowing from the long tradition of 'othered' aliens and monsters at placing them at least in human bodies to help us question our own sexuality. However, it is perhaps testimony to the power of heteronormative discourse that truly fluid sexuality could still only be achieved through monstrous humanoid aliens.

Thus far then I have argued that the focus group respondents were critical of many of the representations of sexuality in the episode and in some cases of the development of the series sexually. In the last part of this chapter I want to consider the focus group talk around sexual identity sparked from discussions about the series. I argue that, despite on the whole positive feedback in the group regarding the fluid representations of the show, close analysis of some of the group talk reveals that their relationship to sexual identity and the need for labelling is perhaps more complex and throws light on some of the wider debates about identity politics.

### **Sexual identity as safety**

The respondent's relationship to sexual identities often appears to be multifaceted. In terms of the representations they are mostly positive about fluid sexualities but their reflections on their own identities and discourses around sexual identities appears to reveal a more complex picture. For example, the following comment is made by a participant who was extremely positive about the sexual representation in the show, however he often reads the representations as 'gay' and sees them through the lens of his experiences as a gay man:

Grp1 – Chris: '(it's good ) especially for teenagers it's bad enough growing up and your skin is erupting and your constantly thinking about other people and that's before you're the only gay in the village'.

Here, despite discussions about the fluid nature of representation in the programme, Chris relates the representations to gay identity. He uses the metaphor of being the 'only gay in the village', a reference to the now famous slogan of the grotesque



character Davith in *Little Britain* (2003-), the grotesque exaggerated gay man who feigned an attempt to meet other gay men but ironically wanted to be the only gay man.

This comparison I would argue is revealing. One of the reasons the representation of Davith is so humorous is that it plays on some of the difficulties of the dilemma faced today politically with gay identity. The desire to be gay, and assert that difference to continue challenging heteronormative attitudes while still fitting into society; a balance which Davith clearly does not strike. The respondent seems to relate to the more touching element of Davith's character, the loneliness of being the 'only gay in the village', and in that way he feels that *Torchwood* has a role in terms of challenging those difficulties. But it is also indicative of a desire to highlight that we are still 'gays' in the 'village' an identity which ironically can create feelings of safety as well as loneliness. This is further revealed in other comments made by the participant when probed about his own sexual identity:

Gp 1 – Chris: 'I know it's fashionable not to reduce yourself to a label but I know a lot of people are more comfortable if they can pigeon hole you and I think some people are anally retentive - I identify with women wanting men so I think it is easier for me to say I am attracted to men and I can say I am gay'.

Duggan's (2002) concept of homonormativity is useful here. Although the term was developed in relation to the geography of sexualities it has some relevance. Duggan suggests that with the political rise of the gay community and its new found confidence there has developed a set of norms within that community. These norms place new pressures above and beyond those from wider society on those in the community to conform to 'homonormative' practices – in the case of the gay scene this could be hedonism through consumption of drugs and club culture for example. These have become expectations of gay culture which resonate within and outside gay culture or communities. Arguably Chris is reflecting this pressure through the above quote about why he chooses to label himself – it is for other people and their expectations of someone who identifies with women that he chooses this label. In that sense, it seems to reveal the power of homonormative (and perhaps labelling)

discourses that a gay man feels he needs the label for others and that he seems to find a sense of security in it.

Other respondents also highlighted the importance of safety:

Grp1 – Julie: ‘there needs to be a space for people to perform their identity’.

Julie points to the need for a space (perhaps geographical and metaphysical) for sexual identity. Despite her desire for a space for identity she also reasserts that she prefers in the end for some fluidity.

Grp 1 – Julie : ‘Yes and not having to name it or define it or pin it down that’s really helpful in society it feels that people have the need to use labels or define our sexuality in a particular way there is a tension between forming your identity as a girl or having to confirm to a norm’

This tension in Julie’s desires reflects the current ambivalence to queer identities that Butler (1997), Sinfield (1998) and Lance and Tanesini (2004) all highlight. However, in all their analyses they urge a rethink in terms of the need for sexual identities but stop short of positing an end to the need for queer identities. Arguably here Julie’s comments highlight at a subjective micro level why academics are reluctant to recommend the end of queer or gay identities. Julie feels the need for the ‘space’ to have an identity. But paradoxically it is the visibility of the queer community and the political fight which has lead to better protection for queers in terms of the law which has allowed this space to develop. The dilemma facing academics is how to bridge the gap between the theoretical aspirations and logical next steps derived from queer theory and their analyses of queer politics and the realities faced by activists and the ‘everyday’ queer on the street. While for many participants the safety of queer sexual identity was important politically, others highlighted that there might be an emotional need for more fixed identities and that representations such as those in *Torchwood* might create emotional pressures for those interpreting them.

### Sexual identity as emotional security

In addition to some gay respondents highlighting the safety or need for gay identity even if only in the sub-text of their group talk around *Torchwood*, one respondent highlighted how it can be seen as emotionally important.

Grp1 – Robert: ‘I think it has become much more difficult for men who are constitutionally heterosexual to feel **confident** about their heterosexuality because of the fluidity you are talking about here and again I see this with my son I can only state it as a belief I believe my son is not gay and he has a number of psychological problems and it means he has only had brief relationships with women he is definitely attracted to women in my view but **he has come under considerable pressure to declare himself gay and he has also been raped as well** which doesn’t help that’s another issue I am not trying to bring that in the discussion I think too much fluidity at least the level of social recognition I think there is a distinction of **fluidity privately** and **fluidity as a recognised social thing** which we all say is ok I think the latter is a problem for men and also perhaps women who are unsure themselves who are **searching for an identity** and what to feel sure about themselves which of course could be a **gay or a heterosexual identity** I think that there is a particular problem with **heterosexual as it is being attacked from the gay side and from the feminist side** men if they are not super confident are not quite sure what to do with themselves’.

The quote reveals that for Robert he sees fluid or gay representation as placing a burden on particularly young people. He also relates this to masculinity a point which I return to in Gender chapter of the thesis<sup>23</sup> but here I want to discuss the need for more stable sexual identity and its relationship to security and emotions. For Robert identity offers security and he alludes to the idea in the above excerpt from the focus group that the notion of a fixed masculine heterosexual identity is under ‘attack’. Elements of what Robert says are problematic in that he alludes to the idea that his son was raped relating it to the pressure of declaring himself gay. However, indirectly

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<sup>23</sup> Of course it is difficult to separate these areas as Robert associates some of the emotional issues to gender but I attempt to here for the purposes of analysis.

his comment highlights one of the debates in queer politics about the need for fixed identities. Queer theorists (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990) have argued that in fixing the Lesbian, Trans or Gay identity we reduce debates about freedom of sexuality to one object choice creating a normalising or exclusionary agenda (Seidman, 1993). Conversely however, academics have also highlighted (Jeffreys 2003, Seidman 1993, Morton, 1996) this 'disrupts' (Warner, 1993) politics to an extent where there may not be a coherent agenda. As Jeffreys notes:

"Lesbian feminist identity is a social construction, I suggest, as is Lesbian identity; but this does not mean it needs to be abandoned. The lesbian is a product of a particular historical moment. In the creation of heterosexuality as a political institution, lesbianism was squeezed out. Lesbians are both the independent women refused heterosexuality and the frightening other who can be used to drive women into the heterosexual fold. Lesbianism needs to exist now to provide a refuge for those women who rebel, and as the basis for a movement of social change." (39)

In this way, while we can't say that Robert's issue with the need for coherent heterosexual masculine identity is the same as Jeffreys' arguments about the need for a Lesbian movement, they still both point to one of the paradoxes of queer identity (and therefore representation) debates, that in deconstructing identity we pull apart some of the political (and emotional safety) glue it provides. And as Jeffreys' points out in the example of women, as is usually the case, it is those with less power such as women and perhaps economically disadvantaged gay men that will suffer more from a lack of representation. Our Identities are representative too. They are the representation of the everyday. And while Robert might not represent an institutionally oppressed group (white middle class straight men) he does highlight that identities are not only political but also intertwined with emotionality – the political is not only personal but also emotional. Indeed other responses from the group in relation to *Torchwood* suggested that in portraying a fluid notion of sexuality the show might also reflect a lack of political (and emotional) depth. When asked whether the show didn't take sexuality very seriously respondents replied:

Pilot – Rich: ‘Yer I think it does a little bit...I’m in two minds because it deals with sex in a natural way but there are issues it could deal with..it could use its platform in a more political or socially responsible way’.

Grp 2 - Ben: ‘It was interesting to see bisexuality displayed from a different way to the norm – there was nothing developed in enough depth to make me think about sexuality properly... it was very much a nod at the dramatic elements of some sexualities’.

Grp 2 - Harry: ‘Well I think comments like the visitors entrance is pretty throw away especially if the audience is a particular age but I guess there are 55 year old geeks who watch it as well as 14 year olds but for different reasons but I think that there was some it can be overt its throw away but it’s in your face’.

In this way, respondents from several groups felt that the show didn’t take sexuality very seriously –that sexuality involves an emotional subjectivity which is not reflected in the series. Others saw this through the prism of playfulness:

Grp1 - Chris said: ‘well I think the notion of playfulness is something which keeps going through my head.’ (turns to another respondent)

Grp1 - Rose said: ‘I think I find like Julie said it was playful it was all a bit tongue in cheek really but I found it quite amusing to watch how it was pretty open season for the two guys to the point where I think it was Jack Hart even found I think it was a poodle attractive walking down the street so in terms of what was considered attractive it was all done in quite a playful way.’

This contrast between a playfulness and depth is also reflected in the debates between those supporting identity politics versus what Seidman categorises as poststructuralism in his critique of the identity wars he comments:

‘Identity politics strains...towards a narrow, liberal interest-group politic aimed at assimilationism or spawns its opposite, a troubling ethnic-nationalist separatism. Poststructuralism is a kind of reverse or, if you wish, deconstructive logic; it dissolves any notion of a substantial unity in identity constructions leaving only rhetorics of identities, performances, and the free

play of difference and possibility, whereas identity politics offers a strong politics on a weak, exclusionary basis, poststructuralism offers a thin politics as it problematizes (sic) the very notion of a collective whose name a movement acts' (Seidman, 1993: 135)

*Torchwood*, as some of my respondents highlighted, could be said to be representative of the way Seidman positions poststructuralism – a 'free play of difference'.

*Torchwood* seems to literally be a textual embodiment of 'thin' but playful 'politics'. It would certainly seem to highlight the performance of sexuality, if we take aside the theatricality an almost Butlerian self-conscious performance of fluidity is enacted through the comments made such as Captain John's remarks around 'quaint little categories' or the way he fancies a poodle. But in doing so it also reminds us that performance in its nature suggests an act that is separate from ourselves – to perform is to be something for others whereas as my respondents have sought to remind me (even if only through discourse) that sexual identity is linked to emotionality and safety, it is something we do with others but also something for ourselves and within ourselves – that has 'depth'. This highlights the need for the sociological element to this research. It reminds us of the complexities of subjectivities and sexual identities.

Poststructuralism as a concept is deconstructive and certainly is a theoretical movement which criticises stable identity. However, I would suggest it is problematic to position it against politics. Many 'political' academics use poststructural logic but do not advocate the end of political identities (Butler being one of them). There is a danger of the debate not only becoming banal due to the simplistic dichotomisation of identity politics versus poststructuralism; it also does not allow for a more precise analysis of the situation or indeed a sophisticated enough means of developing solutions to move the debate forwards. Namaste, in his manifesto of what a sociological queer theory could look like, highlights the importance of the way sociological queer research can help to represent the multiplicity of sexual identities beyond the hetero/homo binary (1996). I would suggest that the responses from my participants have helped to do so by demonstrating the complexity of subjective identities. The conscious aspirations and desires around fluid sexual representations from participants with a variety of sexual tastes and identities, coupled with the

realities of the pressures of homonormative and heteronormative discourses. The results seem to suggest that the securities that sexual identities offer my respondents often come from different locations – family, peers or oppression for others. In this way, as Seidman argues, we should remember that sexual identities do not necessarily offer people a ‘unitary position’ but are a means of expression by which a political movement has been developed. In this sense deconstruction is a tool in identity politics, just as identity politics is subject to deconstructive analysis.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that *Torchwood* offers liberation both sexually in relation to sex as separate from relationships but also more specifically in relation to the notion of sexuality not being reduced to labelling. My respondents were keen to highlight that they saw the representation as more than just bisexuality – as fluid representation - and this is in contrast to the more reductive media reports which classified the sexuality and foregrounded gay male, lesbian elements or reduced it to bisexual stereotypes.

Where my respondents’ interpreted heterosexuality or bisexuality in the text they were critical of what they believed the text was suggesting about these identities. Indeed through critical textual analysis of my own coupled with analysis of some of the group talk about these representations it seems that Russell T. Davies and his production team (whether consciously or not) have reflected heteronormativity and homonormativity in the sub text of the narratives reiterating the pervasive nature of these discourses and the need to be vigilant of them. For example, the ostensible representation of fluid sexuality in the two leading characters when analysed through the monster motif sets up an uncomfortable binary where alien monsters represent bisexual or fluid sexualities and humans can only watch on deprived of ‘real’ fluid sexuality among their own kind. Despite this, at least the representations exist and potentially ask us to question our human sexualities.

Indeed, the subjectivity of sexual identity versus the aspirations of fluidity also became evident when we deconstruct some of the participants talk around the representations in the show. It seems that attitudes to the queer theory objective of knocking down

the boundaries of sexuality are changing and becoming acceptable in principle. However, when we consider the way the participants considered their own sexual identity or their views on the realism in the series in relation to sexuality it brings to life the difficulties of the identity politics vs. poststructuralist fluid identity debate. Hopefully the subjectivities revealed here can highlight a little that it is important not to reduce and dichotomise this debate too much and that instead sexual identities can be seen as multifaceted therefore not easy to categorise. Perhaps by highlighting that the emotional is political it is a reminder that problem is a human one and therefore might require different strategies for change in different circumstances. Deconstruction and identity politics are potentially both useful in this way.



### **‘WHAT THEY NEEDED WAS A ‘SEVEN OF NINE’ IN THERE’: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN, MEN AND GENDER IN *TORCHWOOD***

In the previous chapter my participants on the whole welcomed representation of sexuality without labels. Through textual analysis and group talk it seems that *Torchwood*, at least this particular episode, offers sexual and sexual identity liberation. However, we saw from my own reading and my participant’s interpretations there seems to be a heteronormative element to the portrayal of sex and sexuality operating sub-textually or at the connotative level of the show, perhaps testimony to the power of these discourses. Gender, sex and sexuality are inextricably linked; as Butler argues heterosexual sex is a biological imperative that implicitly generates assumptions about gender (1990). Sex and gender relations and any ‘shifts’ in gendered identity are still more taboo in British culture than politics of sexuality, therefore if we are analysing the series liberatory potential we should ask ourselves how it portrays women, men and elements of gender. In this chapter, then, I want to think more specifically about gender and the representation of men and women in *Torchwood*. I will analyse the attributes of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’, the discourses that are (and are not) available to my participants, and how these constructs seem to be portrayed in *Torchwood*. If sexuality is at least ostensibly liberated through this text, what happens when we begin to analyse this from the perspective of gender?

Broadly speaking through the interpretations of my participants and my own textual analysis, I suggest that women are represented positively as action orientated, breaking with older stereotypes of helpless females, and continuing a recent trend in TV and film. However, the women in the series seem to be undermined narratively and visually in other ways. I go on to suggest that while a variety of masculinities seem to be depicted there is a textual hierarchy in operation whereby a ‘homonormative’ (Duggan, 2002) ‘hyper-masculinity’ reminiscent of that which is dominant in today’s British gay culture, is prioritised over ‘softer’ masculinities or those traits often associated with the ‘feminine’ or females. Before considering the specifics of audience

discourse around gender, women and men in *Torchwood* I want to begin with a consideration of the topic more broadly.

### **Mapping the gender terrain**

Assumptions about gender are so implicit that conflation between sex, sexuality and gender are difficult to avoid in everyday life and academic thinking. Before embarking on a more detailed consideration of how gender is represented in the series it is important to be as clear as I can about how I will employ some of the terms used in relation to the topic. I am not aiming here to set out here a clear general manifesto for the use of terms such as gender, sex, masculinity, femininity, male, female and so on. However, by considering how these terms are used and my use of them, I at least hope my analysis will be as transparent and as easy as possible to follow.

Jackson attempts herself as an exercise to map out how sex, gender and sexuality can be thought about as differing terms; she asks where does one term start to end and the other begin to emerge, even if the boundaries are unclear (2012). She highlights in her chapter that one of the problems we as academics face, and indeed in wider cultural terms too, is the conflation of the terms sex, sexuality and gender. For example, we might say that someone's sex is male and yet we also ask talk about having sex. The latter is more related to sexuality, yes they have exercised the body in order to have sex but in this respect they have also become sexual and explored their sexuality. Already we start to fall into the definitional conundrums posed by these terms. If we think about many academic's own considerations of the topic we can see how it becomes even more complex; for example the title of a chapter on the topic of the 'trans' community is 'Gender fucking or fucking gender...' (Whittle, 1996). The chapter itself is in fact about a number of different alternative lifestyle choices in relation to sex and gender i.e. transsexuals and transgender people. While the title might have been chosen for effect, it nevertheless highlights that gender (masculine/feminine attributes which are often allocated to men and women but which are not exclusive to those bodies) can be grouped with the classification of 'sex'. If we are to be definitional 'sex' refers to the anatomical differences marked by genitals or the act of two people having sexual intercourse. This grouping of sex and

gender under one heading leads to slippage both in academic thinking and wider everyday culture. For example, we can say that a transvestite might want to deploy cross dressing in order to visually embody as much as possible elements of the opposite sex. However, we can also say that a transvestite might want to appear to be more feminine or masculine and in that way demonstrate that they are gendered. Elements of femininity are often related to the body such as being smooth skinned, but that does not have to be related to the sex of that body. In this way, we can see that the social construction of a woman has often been through feminine elements but those feminine elements can (and are) taken up by men and in that sense are not necessarily linked to a female (sexed) body.

In my own analyses, I want to be clear that when I refer to gender I am thinking about those elements such as masculinity and femininity as ideas which are circulating and which are often attributed to men and women. So for example men in the past were often portrayed as strong denoted by muscles – this is an element of their male bodies but it is also an idea about gender – a part of masculinity. These ideas change and are changing but as Jackson (2006) also notes;

‘There is another curious feature of gender, of course: the binary division of gender is a persistent and resilient feature of social and cultural life, incredibly difficult to shift, yet it co-exists with a considerable degree of latitude regarding lived masculinities and femininities, even increasing tolerance (slight, but discernible) towards those that cross the divide. So while gender is a binary division, the categories it produces are not homogenous.’ (41)

In this way, Jackson highlights that the dichotomy of gender is in fact a moving landscape; men can still retain their masculinity while acquiring more of what once might have been seen as feminine. This is evinced through the development of the idea of the ‘new man’ in the 1980s (Mort, 1996) where it became more culturally acceptable for men to preen themselves or use products to enhance their looks, a trait which was once seen to be ‘feminine’. Or the increasing trend for men to shave body hair, another attribute usually associated with ‘femininity’. The male body can take on ‘feminine’ attributes related to the body but masculinity as a notion still remains intact.

These attributes still seem to coalesce and are related culturally to men and women even if they can shift. Moreover, despite the shift in types of masculinity, men have retained their power if we consider unequal pay and the continued male dominance of the British political system. Jackson suggests that one of the reasons for this is the structures of heterosexual institutions which although separate from (hetero)sexual subjectivity, still manage or regulate those subjectivities (or heteronormativity). In other words you might be a man who shaves body hair, grows his hair long, uses moisturiser and has sex with men but the institution of heterosexuality which prioritises men (sex) and masculinity (gender) still offers you the prime position or opportunity for more power perpetuating masculine male hegemony. To borrow from Butler, masculinity is part of the male performance driving the gender binary. While it can be seen as separate from the male body it is often related to men; it is so bound up with men that if we are to consider the power of gender relations we need to analyse how masculinity is represented/conceived.

So far, by analysing some of the terms which are used in gender studies I have argued that even exercises of definition or mapping can cause confusion. It is important to be as clear as we can when analysing cultural meanings and representations of men, women and gender. I will refer to discourses of gender when considering these elements to highlight that they are and can be different to the portrayal of the sexes. However, despite these constructs being social as Jackson reminds us they still seem to coalesce around the sexes and therefore the positioning of those constructs is still important to consider when analysing the depiction of women and men. I want to ask then, if masculinity and those traits often associated with it are part of the hegemonic dominance of men, how are they positioned in the text? Indeed as a site for the visualisation of gender and a physical embodiment of the sexes (male/female) how are men and women in the series portrayed? I begin with the portrayal of women, their visual and narrative representation in the series for two reasons. Firstly, in a conscious effort to foreground female issues at this stage and secondly because there was considerable discussion in the groups about the quality and quantity of the representation of women in the episode screened.

### **Women in *Torchwood***

Many respondents when asked about the portrayal of women felt that on the whole the series depicted women as capable:

Grp -1 Rose: 'in terms of the way women are portrayed – the skills which are portrayed – the Asian lady as kind of technical expert I think that's brilliant. Um and err Gwen kind of standing up for herself and she was being dragged along and she was going to die so I was quite glad to see her give him a punch actually'.

Chris: 'I think they behaved in the way you expect a woman to behave if she was working in the police force or whatever. Both the main female characters realise they are working in a deadly serious job where lives are at stake they have seen people die chasing after fish in cars'.

Pilot - Lizzie: 'I think what you (John) was saying about Captain Jack being indispensable...I think the two women are fairly indispensable too. Like Gwen she's been running the team while he's been away anyway...apart from that stupid getting trapped by Captain John thing (referring to the character getting trapped in the episode screened). And Tosh with her gadgets you know they wouldn't found anything if she hadn't had her gadgets...'.

For these respondents the women's technical skills or ability to lead, all character elements that once might have been allocated to men, indicated that these were relatively positive representations of women. My participants also noted that the female characters were allocated 'action orientated' traits (that once would be allocated to men) through violence, however they suggested a self-conscious element to the way it was depicted.

Grp 4 – Nick: 'There's another interesting moment as well that stuck in my head, it's right at the end where she punches, what's it, John and Captain Jack's like (pretends to laugh), you know, in the corner and I found that a bit strange actually as well, sort of like oh female violence, you know sort of like you

shouldn't really be doing that type of thing, and that was quite interesting as well.'

CH: 'Yes, it was like fetishised only because she was doing it and then ...'

Louise: 'You got hit by a girl.'

Me: 'Yeah.'

Roseanne: 'Yeah.'

Grp 1 - Robert: 'The way they are both at some level idealistically feminised but also very masculine – I find that very uncomfortable it seems to me representing women in that way it is politically motivated in some kind of way and I think it is feminist in a way and it doesn't tie up with my experience of women are like obviously there are a huge wide range of women as there are men – I am rambling really as I find it hard to express it'.

Indeed, the women in the series are all equipped with guns, take part in the missions and are an integral part of the action. As Brown notes in his discussion on the portrayal of tough women, at least this type of representation does bring traits traditionally seen as relating to men into a female body (2004). However, my respondents felt uncomfortable with the way Gwen's punch was depicted and to think more precisely about this I want to also to address its narrative context. If we consider that Captain Jack laughs after Gwen punches Captain John, deriding her violence and lanto comments that he should remember not to get on the wrong side of Gwen, both actions interrupt the flow of the narrative to highlight that Gwen's punch is unusual, reframing it as a 'girl's punch'.

Mulvey's ideas around the 'male gaze' and the role of men and women in film are relevant here (1975). Mulvey asserts that pleasure in looking has been assigned to men (active) versus women (passive) who are to be looked at. She quotes Marilyn Monroe's first appearance in *The River of No Return* (1954) as an example and highlights that 'for a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the

film into a no man's land outside its own time and space' (27); in other words they stop the narrative flow for a time. Of course Mulvey has come under sustained criticism since the writing of her famous article '*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*' for, in the main, an over-reliance on psychoanalysis and for not considering how men might be looked at. However, while Mulvey's theory does have flaws, her assertion that the heteronormative active/passive sexual dynamic is often superimposed on men (active or driving narrative forward) and Women (passive or to be looked at) is relevant when thinking about Gwen's punch in *Torchwood*. The diegesis is interrupted by men (rather than women as Mulvey argues) but this interruption is only to highlight that a woman has been driving the narrative forward, therefore potentially making the audience more conscious of the action (active) female. This stands in contrast to the 'taken-for-granted' action orientated privilege ascribed to the men (particularly Captain Jack and John) in the episode. In that sense while challenging Mulvey's theory to a certain extent when we think about the purpose of the interruption we can see that it is the male protagonists who are slowing, in effect reclaiming the female punch as their own. Indeed, other elements of the portrayal of women in terms of their bodies would suggest that the activity assigned to them is also undermined and I want to think about these possibilities further in the next section.

### **Active women, passive bodies**

A prerequisite for most men in the action genre is that they have the muscles required for the job. However, the female characters in *Torchwood* despite their action orientation keep their slight frames (both Toshi and Gwen are slim) – the bodies they need to maintain their female sexuality as can be seen in the freeze frame below.



Source: <http://lacer.files.wordpress.com/2008/03/Torchwood-team.jpg>

Williams (2003) in her consideration of the Hollywood action female in the 90s, notes that women including Meryl Streep and Demi Moore made their action move without changing their bodies. She argues that women could only make this move into action if they maintained the embodiment of female sexuality. To borrow from O-Day in his writings on 'Gender, Spectacle and the Action Babe', we can say then that the women in *Torchwood* then are both 'active and passive' (2003). They are part of the action but maintain their 'to be looked-at-ness' through their bodies, which in some ways undermines that activity. Given this, I want to now think about other ways in which the equality given to the female characters through action might be undermined in terms of visual cues.

### **Heteronormative dynamic duos**

If we consider some of the promotional materials developed for *Torchwood*, another visual heteronormative binary can be observed. In appendix five of the thesis I have collated a number of the images used by the BBC across series one, two and three for marketing purposes. It can be seen that the women and men are always divided in these shots creating a male/female/male/female pattern. This divides the women and connotes a heteronormative male/female binary; where there is a woman there



should be a man and vice versa. The dynamic is also at play in the diegesis as shown in the freeze frame above where the characters are literally depicted positioned as they would be in promotional materials<sup>24</sup>. This binarism is further exemplified by the pairings in the narrative of the episode screened. When Captain John persuades the team to help him, the team is divided to investigate the whereabouts of the canisters; Owen is paired with Toshi and Gwen with Captain John. Indeed we could say that a further heteronormative binary is played out through the pairing of Ianto and Captain Jack. As I have argued Captain Jack is an alien who has already demonstrated his masculine credentials by sparring with Captain John early in the episode and has kissed John and flirted with Gwen further adding to his bisexual interspecies (masculine) 'laddery'. Captain Jack and Captain John are marked as active through their fight scene, a central plank of the episode denoted by the link of the scene to the title of the episode. Ianto is made passive in the narrative by Captain John when he calls him 'eye candy' and implies that he should be a passive partner in oral sex with Captain John. The narrative juxtaposition of the active Captain Jack and more passive Ianto with male/female pairings I would argue replicates ideas of heterosexuality. In this way, heteronormative gender and active/passive binaries are played out, first connoted by male/female team pairings then through active/passive pairing of Captain Jack and Ianto.

So far then, I have argued that the women in the series are joining other more recent female representations of 'action orientated' ladies and in that sense are still challenging some academic ideas about females in film and television as passive. However, I have suggested that sub-textually the ostensible action orientation has been undermined through the maintenance of the female body and heteronormative pairings. While the focus group participants did welcome the action orientated nature of women in the series, they were more critical about other aspects of the representation of women both in terms of quantity and quality. It is to the prominence of women as discussed by my respondents that I now want to turn.

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<sup>24</sup>A move that furthers Hill's (2010) arguments around branding for *Torchwood* which uses easily recognised brands, motifs and in this case visual formations that offer continuation between the series despite the various series being themed differently, allocated to different channels and timeslots.

### Where are the women?

On the whole the groups agreed that women did not seem to be as prominent as the men.

Pilot - CH: 'Anything else then about women on their own, we said that there was a lot of focus on Captain Jack would you say that's true of the women as well'.

Rosie: 'Not really I mean Gwen is the first character we meet in the show so there is that feeling of trying to make her the heart of the team'.

Louise: 'She's really annoying'.

Rosie: 'Yes she is but...'

Gillian: 'So she gets a lot of it and Tosh doesn't seem to ...and there are hardly any conversations with just two women as well'.

Louise: 'Yes it's a bare pass of the back door test'.

Rosie: 'Yeah don't know what I mean there think there needs to be more awesome women in *Torchwood*'.

Grp 2 - CH: 'Ok so I want to turn it round now and ask you how you think the women were portrayed in the show, and then think about the idea of femininity and whether that was oppressed or not but let's start with women'.

Jenny: 'It's more that they were invisible it's not that they were oppressed, they just weren't really there or just helping out.'

Ben: 'They were very servile but then the Gwen character became a lot stronger towards the end obviously'.

Harry: 'She still had to be rescued though, it's almost like those old narratives are still there'.

Grp 3 – Sally: The women were useless, I don't know if anybody else noticed that (laughter), they got beat up, poisoned, kidnapped – it was just ridiculous.

Mandy: 'Damsels in distress'.

Sally: 'Yeah'.

Mandy: 'Men to the rescue sort of'.

Greg: 'Oh yeah, yeah'.

Damian: 'Eye candy probably'.

Mandy: 'What they needed was a seven of nine in there'.

Indeed the narrative of the episode screened is oriented towards men; the return of Captain Jack and the reunion of him and his ex-partner. Furthermore if we consider the series more broadly, Jack is the leading man and in that sense women are his sidekicks. Gwen does lead the *Torchwood* team in Jack's absence offering some narrative female power. However, this leadership is scuppered and made to be 'not quite good enough' by narrative in the episode which suggests that things are better when Jack is around. Also the opening sequence which shows the team tailing an alien blowfish and successfully tracking it down depicts Captain Jack entering the fray at the last moment. The team is about to kill the alien but as they hesitate the moment is saved by Captain Jack who kills the alien for them, the hero of the scene, implying the team could not have done it without him and by default that Gwen is not leading the team capably. The argument that Gwen is never allowed to really lead the team is furthered by the scene where she challenges Jack's new return to leadership in terms of the way he wants to conduct the investigation with his old friend Captain John. Gwen wins a fight to accompany Captain John but this negotiation of power, this small female win, is soon undermined by Captain's Jack's sexualisation of Gwen when he warns her about Captain's John's poisonous kisses. She is further sexualised when Captain John shouts through to ask if she has been warned about the kissing yet. Indeed, earlier in the scene a misogyny is suggested when Captain John petitions Captain Jack to let Gwen have her say, the implication being two men are arguing over whether the woman should have power. In this way, then, while women in the series

do get an 'action edge' which challenges stereotypes of the past, they also seem to fit into a more recent resurgence of the woman as crime-fighting sidekick. I want to consider this now in broader generic terms to think about how these representations of females in the series fit into the history of depictions of women on TV.

### **Women and crime**

As I will discuss in the later chapter on genre, there is a case that *Torchwood* can be seen as a hybrid of a crime serial. It uses the tropes of the detective series through visual effects/props/scenery including Cardiff cityscape shots mimicking the *CSI franchise* (2000-), the use of fast moving scenes, fast car-chase sequences, crime fighting technology, the inclusion of post mortem/medical facility scenes reminiscent of *Silent Witness* (1996-) and perhaps most overtly in the narrative the inclusion of a Policewoman (Gwen) as the sidekick to Captain Jack. Thornham highlights that in the crime series women are more often than not the sidekicks to men (2007). There have been moments in TV history where representation of women is subverted in the crime fighting genre through leading lady detectives; Thornham notes *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-1988) and *Prime Suspect* (1991-2006). Indeed it has been argued that TV has been much more confident about foregrounding the female investigator than cinema (Tasker, 1998). Of course if we think back to the 80s this could be said to be the 'hay-day' of female investigators on British TV from the import of *Cagney and Lacey* through to our own *Juliet Bravo* (1980-1985), *The Gentle Touch* (1980-1984) and *Cat's Eyes* (1985-1987) – all series with leading investigative ladies. More recent crime fighting TV in the UK has returned us to more conventional models of women as sidekicks. For example, *Cracker's* (1993-2006) DS Jane to boss Fitz, or the various male lead detectives in the *Midsommer Murders* (1997-), or the much more recent *Waking the Dead* (2000-2011) *Life on Mars* (2006-2007) and *Ashes to Ashes* (2008-2010). There are exceptions, including the BBC's *New Tricks* (2003-) but even then the leading lady only gets to lead a team of retired men. Arguably then, in terms of the crime genre, *Torchwood* is following a more recent trend for females to once again be resigned mostly to sidekick status. The representation of women is also problematic if we consider their sexuality in the series, an area which I now wish to turn to.

### Women as less sexually fluid

My respondents also noted that sexual representation of women did not appear to be as varied as men in the series.

Grp 4 – Louise: ‘Yeah, they’re a lot less fluid, aren’t they, than the male characters, the female characters, and yet it’s like the men can do anything, be anything, shag anything but the women are just kind of...’

Roseanne ‘They don’t get to have as much fun, no’.

Louise ‘Yeah’.

Debbie ‘That’s true’ (laughter).

Grp 2 - Harry: ‘You see I think it would be queer if those women had a sexuality, so I don’t think it is really inclusive in anyway we have these overt bisexual characters but these women are sexless’.

In the episode screened there is certainly a focus on the sexual activity and interests of the two leading men. There are, however, other episodes in the series which do focus more on women and their sexuality (for example the episode ‘*Greeks Bearing Gifts*’ in series one where Toshi kisses a woman albeit an alien woman), or in the episode ‘*Day 1*’ in the first series when Gwen reciprocates the advances of an alien in female form. Nevertheless, both these scenes are undermined by the idea that the women can only have sex with alien women (they are never depicted having sex with human women or each other). Furthermore, in the scene where Gwen kisses an alien, any female agency offered here is reframed by the revelation that Owen (the only character who is never seen having fluid sexual experiences) is watching the girls and portrayed as ‘getting off’ on their sexual act – a much more familiar patriarchal trope. This is further problematised by the lack of a reversal of this voyeurism during the numerous times which men (alien to alien and alien to human) kiss in the series and are never watched

secretly by women<sup>25</sup>. In this way, the male to male sexuality (of various more liberated forms) is fetishised through privacy whereas the female to female (alien to female – the only form of female to female sexual narrative) sexuality is still for the pleasure of men. Indeed, my argument that there is a sub-textual patriarchy in operation is further exemplified if we consider my participants observations about the women's friendships in the series.

### **Female bonds**

It was noted by a number of groups that women were not afforded the same opportunity as men in the series to demonstrate any solidarity.

Grp 4 –Susan: 'And the thing that I notice as well is there is all this thing about the relationships but there doesn't feel to be any relationship between Gwen and Tosh and that feels like a missed opportunity, there could be a really strong sort of powerful...'

CH: 'Yes, bond'.

Debbie: 'Yeah'.

Susan: '... friendship between ... so you sort of feel, do you know what I mean, they spark off each other or something'.

Roseanne: 'But I think that kind of actual feminine dimension is completely missing'.

Susan: 'Yeah and it feels like that's the only one where there isn't a relationship in a way because all the others seem to relate, like the women relate to the men, you know, but those two don't and that's quite a big gap'.

Pilot - Rosie: 'So she gets a lot of it and Tosh doesn't seem to ...and there are hardly any conversations with just two women as well'.

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<sup>25</sup> It is the act of secretive watching rather than being more generally observed that I argue makes the alien to human lesbian kiss patriarchal as this reframes the narrative as 'for men' rather than as a general act that men and women could observe.

Here the two groups noted that they found a mismatch between the portrayals of women relating to men, as opposed to women relating to each other. Indeed, in the episode screened the two female characters only have one short sequence talking to each other where Gwen is immobilised. Toshi is needed for her technical abilities to help diagnose the poison which has been administered to Gwen, and in this sense is required to interact with Gwen rather than to socialise or support her voluntarily. This trope continues throughout the series with few instances of Gwen and Toshi interacting as friends or lovers. This should perhaps not be surprising given the survival rate of TV shows which focus on women's friendships. D'Acci (1987) notes that *Cagney and Lacey* (1981-1988) had to overcome many hurdles to get on to US TV including financial pressures and debates over who would play the leading ladies based on the need to get the right women (often those seen in the industry as most sexually attractive). The show was eventually taken off air by pressure around the portrayal of women after it was dogged by political groups for its gritty representation of an abortion. Moreover, Tasker (1998) notes that following *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Cagney and Lacey* there has not been the wave of female buddy movies or TV shows that one would expect given the success of both enterprises. Based on my own reading and that of my participants *Torchwood* certainly doesn't seem to be challenging this landscape. If, in the last chapter, I argued that perhaps some of my participant's difficulty with the representation of violence was related to the revelation of the full homosocial spectrum, then their difficulty with the representation of women could be the uneasiness caused by the lack of any form of female social spectrum (Rich, 1980) in the episode.

### **Representation of women - summary**

In terms of the portrayal of women in *Torchwood* overall, the majority of women in the focus groups were critical. While on the whole they felt women were at least part of the action and shown to be ostensibly strong they noted that they were side lined in the plot (in the episode shown). Indeed, my own textual analysis suggests that women in this episode and more broadly in the series are not depicted enjoying friendships. If we read the series as a crime serial it reminds us that Gwen is the next in a long line of female crime fighting sidekicks – a position that she is unable to disrupt in the

narrative without being undermined. Perhaps most problematically my respondents noted that the women are often not afforded the same sexual opportunities as the men and this seems to be confirmed through textual analysis. Furthermore, the women's lesbianism is reduced to being seen through the lens of alien encounters rather than as potentially between women. In this way, then, at least in terms of Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze', women are active and passive in the series (continuing a trend in film and TV) rather than just passive. However, by stepping outside this useful but restrictive way of reading women's portrayal in film and TV, we can see that the action orientated element that the women have gained are undermined through other elements of their depiction.

With this in mind, if women are side lined at least to a certain extent in *Torchwood*, how then are men positioned in the show? How did my respondents interpret the way men and masculinity is depicted? What can this also tell us about the positioning of masculinity against femininity in the series? If women have more limited options sexually how do the men in the show compare? What discourses are (and are not) available to my participants when they consider masculinity and men. My respondents conceptualised the masculinities on offer in different ways and through their readings I want to consider these interpretations in relation to the politics of sex representation, gender (and gendered sexual) representation. I want to begin by returning to the notion of the 'gaze' which I discussed in relation to female representation in the first part of this chapter but thinking about this in relation to men. What happens when we think of men as spectacle in relation to *Torchwood*? I move on to discussing broadly how my participants interpreted the representation of men and masculinity in the series and then focus more specifically on two key discourses of masculinity which emerged: hyper masculinity and a softer form of masculinity.

### **Men as spectacle**

The focus on the homosocial spectrum that I argued exists in the episode screened, makes it hard to ignore some of the issues of the 'gaze' upon men which have become so contested in film (and to a certain extent) TV studies. As I noted in the previous



chapter the fight scene for some of my respondents was indeed a spectacle as highlighted in the following respondent's comment:

Pilot – Geri: 'At first I was discouraged by the fish it seemed to be one of those shows with aliens flying around – but then I thought it was really interesting this scene with these two guys walking towards each other as if they were going to shoot each other and then they kissed I thought it was really *cool*. I thought it was really *cool* how they brought sexuality and violence together in that scene and then like it was a family but everyone was attracted to each other'.

*(my italics for emphasis)*

Neale's work on masculinity as spectacle is relevant here. He indirectly challenges Mulvey's theory of the male gaze by asking searching questions around the potential for displays of masculinity to be 'looked at' in terms of erotics and identification (1993). Neale highlights the example of John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). He argues that the star is 'feminised' and in that sense made homoerotic but also acts as a leading male driving the narrative; offering potential for male identification and objectification (potentially by women and men). Neale does make a reasonable point about the potential for a man to be the focus of the gaze, be that male or female. However, Neale too is conflating gender and sex, by attributing Travolta's dancing and tight fitting suit to femininity and then transposing that on to Mulvey's arguments around representation of men and women. In essence, it is the male body that is being looked upon and objectified not the 'feminisation' of that body. Travolta is a man being gazed upon sexually but after that the means of that objectification and whether it can be classified as 'feminine' seems irrelevant. It again highlights what could be called the 'camera trickery' of gender, the trap I have too found myself falling into when analysing audience interpretations. We look and see one thing, but somehow manage to interpret another; redefining it in a Butlerian 'action replay' of the gender we have performed (and have seen performed) so many times before.

To return to the spectacle of men, if we consider other parts of recent filmic history, they are often on 'display' furthering Neale's assertion of the male as spectacle.

Examples include *Top Gun* (1986), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *The Fight Club* (1999), the Bond franchise and a fairly long list of other 'action' movies where men are eroticised through shirtless fights or sports scenes where they exhibit toned or muscled bodies. While we do not see any naked bodies in this episode of *Torchwood*, the fight scene is eroticised through the inclusion of the kiss and in that sense male homosexuality is on display. However, by subverting the ostensible reunification of this 'multi-sexual' couple into a fight scene, it becomes a display of men which offers males and females a chance to potentially enjoy it as an erotic pleasure or as a display of a more familiar type of patriarchy - the fight for male dominance. Indeed, this scene resembles those that Neale refers to elsewhere in his piece on spectacle. He uses the example of Leone's Westerns<sup>26</sup>, where the repeated exchange of looks between men 'is taken to the point of fetishistic parody through the use of extreme and repetitive close ups' (1993: 17). Neale goes on to highlight the way the narrative is frozen and spectacle takes over – the diegesis is slowed so the viewer can 'recognise the pleasure of display' (1993:17). Of course, Neale is suggesting that the homoerotic element is unsaid, whereas in *Torchwood* it is revealed. Nevertheless, the storyline does freeze for some time marked by the start and end of non-diegetic music (*Blur's* Song 2) while we as viewers are offered the spectacle of Captain John and Jack bar fighting. In this sense, I would argue we are still being asked to stop and become voyeurs to this display of masculinity exercised through the male body. Moreover, the fight scene is further fetishised by the image of burning fire in the background suggestive of eroticism, seen in scenes of sex in front of burning fires so many times before in TV and filmic history.

My point in returning to arguments about men as spectacle is by analysing this scene we can see that in displaying the homosocial spectrum this set piece brings together fetishisation of men's bodies erotically and the battle for dominance between men. This echoes the notion of the potential for an 'alpha' male, which feeds into established and traditional forms of masculinity. In short, it pivots on an erotic/violent binary implying a close and rather uneasy relationship between the two and visualising it to be related to men and expressions of masculinity. Indeed, this full display of the

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<sup>26</sup> A particularly relevant comparison here, as this scene relies heavily on the trope of the Western denoted by the hands on hips and gun holster pose at the beginning of the scene, and the slow steps towards each other with music timed to the rhythm of their steps.

homosocial spectrum means there are some comparisons to be made here between this scene and slash fiction. I want to think about these comparisons more carefully next, to see if they can help throw any light on the potential for this scene to be restrictive in terms of discourses around the representation of men and masculinity.

### **John/Jack**

Jenkins in his extensive collection of essays on fandom considers the freedoms that might be 'poached' by fans through slash fiction (1992). He defines slash as follows: 'The colourful term "slash," refers to the convention of employing a stroke or "slash" to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters (Kirk/Spock or K/S) and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists' (186). In this way, then, slash has been seen as reclamation of storylines by fans in order to portray male/male friendships as homoerotic. So, for example, Jenkins cites examples of Blake and Avon from *'Blakes 7'* (1978-1981) or Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin from *'The Man from UNCLE'* (1964-1968) as two sets of male/male TV friends who slash writers have 'poached' in order to develop their friendship further into erotic affairs.

Jenkins suggests that slash liberates through its achievement of revealing the full homosocial spectrum, in the same way I have argued in terms of the bar brawl scene in the episode screened. While we can say that evidently from the respondent's above comment it has some liberatory potential for women (and men), who wish to see two men together erotically, there are differences between slash and this scene which are worth highlighting. Jenkins notes that slash shows tenderness between men, that while these characters within their 'conventional' diegesis are depicted as fighting men oozing the usual requirements of masculinity for men needed for action movies or action and science fiction TV, in slash the women<sup>27</sup> writing the stories depict men as gentle lovers. Jenkins quotes Lamb and Veith and their discussion of a Kirk and Spock slash writing to highlight this: "Theirs is a union of strengths, a partnership rarely possible between men and women today and just as unlikely – if not more so – between men and women in the SF (*Science Fiction*) television universe....The zines

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<sup>27</sup> Jenkins highlights that Slash is usually written by women.

assume that the basis for Kirk's and Spock's mutual commitment is their unquestioning reliance on one another's courage strength and wit' (1986: 193)(my italics for clarity). This, it is argued by both academics and slash writers Jenkins (1992), Lamb and Veith (1986) and Fish (1984), challenges heteronormative ideas of romance which are structured in patriarchal terms. As Jenkins contends, there is 'little space for ... reciprocity in male-female romance' (1993). Moreover, and of particular relevance to my analysis here, Jenkins asserts through his reading of Lamb and Veith (1986) that this love between equals suspends usual parameters of gender.

'Kirk is sexually promiscuous, an undisputed leader, always ready for action and in command of most situations (masculine), yet he is beautiful, emotive, sensuous and smaller (feminine): Spock is rational, logical, emotionally controlled, keeps others at a distance, and stronger (masculine) while he is also virginial, governed by bodily cycles, an outsider and fully committed to sexual fidelity (feminine).'

(Jenkins, 1992: 193)

So in this way, the slash that Jenkins considers plays with what are often considered to be masculine or feminine traits, subverting heteronormative dynamics of gender and the sexed body all at once. To reframe this then in terms of *Torchwood* and the bar scene, this gentle emotional love between two men is barely shown, instead we see what could be read as a very 'tough' kiss, not a slow and sensual joining of two men's mouths but a fast and rough kiss which segues straight into a bar brawl. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly in terms of an analysis of gender dynamics, both men seem to be positioned with more of the 'masculine' traits that Jenkins identifies. Jack keeps his team at an emotional distance; John creates distance with his new found friends by deceiving them. Jack is shown to be a leader through his easy reclamation of the *Torchwood* team; while John is depicted as strong through his ability to throw men around and kill easily. Rarely in the episode are either men shown to be emotional except where Jack has a 'heart to heart' with Gwen but even then he is seen to be associated with what is often defined as a 'masculine' trait, his repression of emotion for Gwen. It would seem then, if we think about the spectacle of the two men in this scene we can say there is evidently some liberation through the revelation of the full homosocial spectrum, also evinced by reaction from my focus group

participants. However, an analysis of the Jack/John dynamic with slash fiction in mind perhaps reveals that the more liberal freedoms around gender and the sexed body offered by slash are not reproduced in the same way. If this is the case what then were my focus group's interpretations of the masculinity portrayed in the episode screened? I want to think more precisely now about representations of masculinity in the episode in terms of the discourses it generated in the group talk.

### **Representations and discourses of masculinity**

Overall my respondents agreed that while some of the representations of men and masculinities were problematic at least there were some different types of masculinity on offer:

Grp 4 – Nick: 'There are other scenes though that I felt did represent different types of masculinity so the one that really stood out, the one scene that really stood out for me in the whole of this whole episode was the one in the elevator, with the older man and the younger man, with the older man really saying 'actually you're quite pretty and quite feminine and actually I'm much harder than you ...' so there was this different representations of masculinity in there ...'

Debbie: 'True, true.'

As mentioned in the earlier section on women, members of other groups also highlighted that they found the mixing of types of masculinity positive particularly in light of what they termed the 'gay' sexuality of the leading men.

Pilot - Rosie: 'It's different to how gay people are often portrayed as camp here they still have guns and everything. And it's like what Jane said earlier I like the scene where Captain Jack and John nearly fight then kiss then fight then kiss again...in a way they're still like traditional manly men in that sense which in itself could be problematic but I like the way their sexuality isn't reduced to a stereotype ... and actually the women are action heroes as well'

Gillian: 'But without being kind of butch'.

Here then Rosie notes that the show challenges gay male stereotypes by presenting men who have sex with men as potentially both 'traditional manly men' but also as able to show love (and therefore she is suggesting a softer side) to each other through kissing. This notion of the two leading men as more 'manly men' was also noted by other focus group members:

Grp 4 – Louise: 'I think it was ... they're all really quite sort of manly apart from maybe, what's his name ...'

Roseanne 'lanto'.

Louise '... yes but I think like, you know, considering that the sexuality is so fluid, you know, they're all quite kind of guns and punching each other and (laughs) sort of getting stuffed around by one another'.

Roseanne 'But it's not always like that though is it? I'm just thinking, I'm trying to recall ...'

Danny 'I think it was an extreme ...'

Roseanne 'Yeah'.

Danny '... that was fairly extreme and I think that's tied in with what we were saying about it being a metaphor or an alternative for the sex thing but I think even that is being set up actually, the kind of whole, you know, rough-tough hard-drinking ...'

Roseanne 'Oh yeah'.

Danny '... I mean it's kind of being set up I think quite mercilessly'

Debbie 'Yeah but if you try to imagine the same scene with Priscilla type of characters, very camp ...'

In this exchange the group in question discusses the idea that the two leading men are depicted as manly. They discursively frame this by highlighting that they have guns, fight, and are rough/tough and hard drinking. At the end Debbie also highlights that to depict men in any other way would be problematic. In this way, she is perhaps referring to the generic pressures exerted by science fiction/crime series and the role men are usually assigned in these series. Also, it is perhaps testimony to the power of discourses of gender and the sexes, that Debbie herself openly gay should draw this exchange back to the boundaries of what might and might not be acceptable relating to the sexes in gender terms. Indeed, the power of discourses of gender can be seen elsewhere in group talk from my focus groups and I want to briefly consider this now to further highlight how implicit assumptions about gender can be.

### **Gender binarism in group talk**

Analysis of two respondent's comments in particular reveals how traditional ideas of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are privileged, even if more conservative notions of sexuality were on the whole challenged by my participants.

Pilot - Rosie: 'It's different to how gay people are often portrayed as camp here they still have guns and everything. And it's like what Jane said earlier I like the scene where Captain Jack and John nearly fight then kiss then fight then kiss again...in a way they're still like traditional manly men in that sense which in itself could be problematic but I like the way their sexuality isn't reduced to a stereotype ... and actually the women are action heroes as well'.

Gilliam: 'But without being kind of butch'.

In this way, the respondent highlights that there is a plurality of masculinity in the series and frames this as positive in terms of representation of gay men. However, she still discursively highlights the importance of men being 'manly' despite being conscious of it (and links this to sexuality and the male body) and her fellow participant further reifies the male/female sex and gender binaries by suggesting that the female representations are positive by maintaining femininity. This highlights the power of discourses of gender whereby the focus group member draws on a language of

traditional masculinity even before realising it herself. However, members of other groups did read softer types of masculinity in *Torchwood* again suggesting that the series offers a plurality in the masculinities it portrays.

### **Softer men and masculinities**

Potentially the text could be said to be juxtaposing the extremity of 'rough-tough' masculinity previously discussed with softer forms of masculinity. Indeed this was noted by some of my respondents:

Grp 1 - CH: 'Can anyone think of times where men were less masculine?'

Chris: 'Of course, there were quite a few instances for instance where Jack Hart (*probably referring to Captain John here*) is pointing the gun at the guy and calling him eye candy, and automatically beautifying him. Then there was the relationship between the two male leads and one plays this kind of arrogant asshole masculinity all the way through which I couldn't stand, but then he is wearing the Adam ant style jacket which is referencing the 80's where it was ok for men to feminise themselves with make up so it was paying on these different masculinities'.

Rose: 'And what about the argument about who was the women'.

Chris: 'yes and all the innuendos like the 'visitors entrance' like we have never heard that one before but all these little campy asides I thought were wonderful'.

In this way, then, the episode screened and indeed the series as a whole can be said to challenge older monolithic notions of masculinity. This is achieved by subverting the 'butchness' required by the leading men to survive a science fiction/crime narrative with softer forms of masculinity and openly fluid sexuality. Moreover, it furthers my arguments indirectly regarding the centrality of the homosocial spectrum in the episode screened. The spectacle of the full homosocial spectrum involves men showing love, friendship and being violent therefore highlighting a range of elements of masculinity as well as the homosexual possibility. It is highlighted by the emergence



and extensive discussion by my participants of two other ideas about masculinity which they believed were depicted in the episode screened – ‘stereotypical’ and a ‘hyper’ forms of masculinity which I want to consider next.

### **Stereotypical masculinity**

An overarching reading from most of my focus groups was that the two leading men in many ways displayed out-dated or stereotypical ideas of masculinity:

Grp 1 – Julie: ‘I thought the portrayal of masculinity was in some ways quite stereotypical; these beautiful immortal strong men and then these women were well groomed and beautiful it didn’t really feel like a representation of real life out there really – it was a little bit plastic’

Chris: ‘there was the relationship between the two male leads and one plays this kind of arrogant asshole masculinity all the way through which I couldn’t stand’

Pilot – Rosie: ‘I think it’s quite interesting with the characters that even though they’re bisexual or pansexual or whatever we want to call it they’re still action heroes. It’s different to how gay people are often portrayed as camp here they still have guns and everything. And it’s like what Ruth said earlier I like the scene where captain jack and john nearly fight then kiss then fight then kiss again...in a way they’re still like traditional manly men in that sense’

Julie highlights the idea that the masculinity is stereotypical. She does so by discursively connecting immortality with strength and then with men – in this way suggesting that Captain Jack’s immortality signifies strength; a characteristic often associated with the traditional idea of manhood and seen through countless TV and cinematic representations of action heroes. Rosie also highlights that they are traditional and manly and makes this connection by highlighting that they are action heroes, have guns and are not depicted the way gay people are usually portrayed - as camp, inferring that traditional masculinity or manly men are not usually gay or camp. Chris goes further than this and suggests that Captain John could be seen as arrogant and asshole (or Jack he did not make it clear but arguably John is the more ‘arrogant’

of the two) but relates that to his masculinity. Of course we have to be careful not to conflate being a man (sex) with masculine traits (gender). Nevertheless, Captain John's bravado and ostensible strength are demonstrated through his ability to throw a man off a roof and wide ranging and continual sexual appetite. These elements could all be said to reflect traits associated with stoic, hard-nosed and 'stud-like' 'traditional' or 'stereotypical' notions of masculinity. This form of extreme masculinity was discussed considerably in all of my focus groups and I want to turn now to look at this more carefully.

### **Hyper-masculinity**

The trope of hyper-masculinity emerged unprompted <sup>28</sup>in all my focus groups suggesting that it is a meaning in the text that stood out for most of my participants:

Grp 2 - Ben: 'I think it was very different between the two alien characters and the two human characters because the humans were very passive, not macho, and the two alien guys were very macho full of bravado very cold and calculating really

Sue: 'And the non alien guys when it came to flirting you sort have had captain Jack and the other guy and the girls were being very sexual at them where as the other guys were much more passive, the kind of non aliens seem to be cast much more into that role versus the kind of hyper masculinity'.

Harry: 'I think it's quite interesting as well that usually Aliens tend not to have a sexuality really'.

Shane: 'Yeah but the thing I also didn't like about it is that the two alien time drifters or whatever you call them who were bisexual or shagged anything that moved, were so very masculine guys you couldn't imagine anyone like that an alien or whatever actually wanting to have a relationship and there was the guy the ex boyfriend and they started

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<sup>28</sup> I did not ask the respondents whether they found the representations of masculinity to be foregrounded or to be of a particular type, rather I asked what they thought about the depiction of men and masculinity in the series.

kissing and punching. I really didn't like that at all I felt like that was I don't know gross in a really masculine typical way'.

Harry: 'It's like that whole idea of making love and beating someone up at the same time...you know'.

Shane: 'So macho'.

Harry: 'Yes I think there was some highly sexualised male'.

Sue: 'alpha males'.

### *Extract 2*

Grp 2- CH: 'OK so ...I am getting the feeling you think it was a certain kind of masculinity but that some characters owned that, whereas others had a different version do you think that something the narrative was telling you to take out of that?

Shane: 'That hyper masculinity is good, gets you noticed gets what you want, and they had that funny little exchange where they said you were the wife no you were the wife and that again I found quite offensive'.

Jenny: 'Yeah it was misogynist'.

Shane: 'Being passive or being female in anyway was not on the table in any option'.

Harry: 'Is that what they meant when they said the wife thing'.

Shane: 'I assume that's what they meant taking a passive role in sex but just generally taking a passive role in relationships'.

In these two exchanges it can be seen that the group spent considerable time discussing the traits of Captain Jack and John. The participants are in general agreement here that Captain Jack and John are endowed with 'macho' or 'hyper-masculine' traits denoted by the use of terms such as cold, calculating and bravado. Indeed, in the second conversation Shane goes further and suggests that these traits

are foregrounded (hyper-masculinity is good). As I have already argued in this chapter it would certainly seem to be the case that men are central to the narrative of the episode. The key fight scene or 'set-piece' literally plays out the title of the episode '*Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang*' with only two men in this scene fighting for dominance it certainly links men, traits of hyper-masculinity and the overall diegesis (episode title) together. While on its own hyper-masculinity of course has been a mainstay of TV and cinema action heroes and in that sense could be seen as a generic demand. However, I want to consider this interpretation of masculinity in light of two other key discourses emerging from the two previous conversations; firstly, the observation by my respondents that the leading men are aliens, and secondly, the discursive connection they make between the possibility that the sexuality of Captain Jack and John reflects upon how they are read as men.

### **Alien masculinity**

In the last chapter I noted that Captain Jack and Captain John could be read as monstrous in a number of ways. I wish now to return to this discussion but in light of gender. In the group's comments above a clear connection is made between the sexuality, masculinity and the alien origins of Captain Jack and John and is worthy of further consideration. While we can say that the two leading characters are both alien and get much of the sexual action (both human to alien and alien to alien), we can also consider that they are both men and in this way adding another potentially problematic element to the alien/human binary. My respondents suggested that not only are they men but they are also endowed with hyper-masculine qualities. As I highlighted in the previous chapter qualities including 'mystery' and 'less emotionality' can be read as monstrous. However, they are also often interpreted as part of a traditional form of masculinity highlighted by countless representations of action heroes across a number of genres including the cowboy in the western, the detective in the thriller and the action hero in science-fiction. In this way, we can say that not only can Captain Jack and John be viewed as monsters, they can also be seen as monstrous multi-sexual men. It can be argued that this creates a human/alien sexual binary and it also reifies the 'hyper' version of masculinity, versus the less 'masculine' human men and indeed women. This is also complicated and in many ways further

problematised when we consider how some of the focus group attendees interpreted this masculinity in light of the two leading men's sexuality.

### **Sexuality, gender and the sexed body**

Several of my respondents highlighted that they believed the bisexuality or fluid sexuality of the Captain Jack and John characters affected how they (or others) interpreted their hyper-masculine traits:

Grp 2 - Harry: 'Yer but also it's a bit misplaced he is an emotional being but then he is violent I don't know as you said if it was a representation of a heterosexual he would be horrible – I don't know whether it's preconceptions but it's like he is a little bit bi he'll be alright really'.

Shane: 'It would be better if it was just a bit more believable. Ok so one of them is an alien so what am I expecting but...to me I also find some of it a little bit offensive because the humans are all sensitive and they all want a relationship with Jack whereas he is a bisexual and can sleep with anyone suggesting they are all crazy people and don't give a shit about feelings. They just want to fuck anything but the one who are definitely straight or gay are the ones who are a bit boring and pedestrian'.

Ben: 'Or aching for relationships'.

Shane: 'Or him, he is basically just an arsehole, and if he was straight and all the people he had been sleeping with were women we would be thinking why on earth he is not at all a hero cheating on three different women at the same time so I don't particularly like him'.

As the above conversation highlights members of several of the focus groups noted Captain Jack's sexuality (named as bisexual here) somehow makes a reading of his masculinity as misogynist more difficult. In this sense then, not only are the two leading men privileged by their alien super-human status, they display hyper-masculine traits which when superimposed onto sexuality are somehow made to be less visible. Two potential reasons for this are the well-established stereotypes of gay (queer) men as nice, but also of a more broader acceptance of promiscuous men as

‘studs’. Of course promiscuity is also a well-established stereotype for gay men and it is to this link between discourses of hyper-masculinity, their privileging and the representations of gay masculinity in *Torchwood*, which I now wish to turn.

### **Fluid sexual narrative, sub-textual gay men**

If we consider that my participants on several occasions have read Captain Jack as ‘gay’ (which I discussed in chapter 1) and indeed often refer to him that way, this might not be surprising when we analyse how he is represented. We see Captain Jack flirting with both men and women in the series and the episode screened, we only ever see him have sexual contact with men. Indeed, it could be argued that Captain Jack and John, with their military outfits and hyper-masculine traits, include elements of a more familiar contemporary gay male identity but in narrative fluid sexual bodies. This hyper gay-masculinity emerged in the gay scene in the 70s in the form of the gay clone (Edwards, 2006, Forrest, 1994 and Gough, 1989) and arguably is now a dominant identity in gay sub-culture. This is expressed in British gay sub-culture through the maintenance of muscled bodies, the wearing of tattoos, and the use of terms including ‘straight-acting’ and ‘masculine’. All of which are evident in many gay men’s online sex profiles, or through images of muscled men in tight t-shirts with oversized genitals, displayed in the shop windows of Brighton’s Kemptown and London’s Soho or dotted throughout gay magazines including *Gay Times* and *Attitude*. Furthermore, more often than not references to effeminacy or campness in gay sub-culture are defended against through terms such as ‘no campies’ included in the wording of online advertisements. While this type of hyper-masculinity I would suggest is actually not representative of everyday ‘straight’ masculinity and in that sense is a parody, the extent to which for those performing this element of gender it is a conscious act of irony, is difficult to establish. As Edwards (2006) has noted gay hyper-masculinity could be seen as camp in terms of its extreme parody of ‘straight’ masculinity. In other words, many straight men who are by the nature of their sexuality automatically allowed access to ‘hegemonic masculinity’, are not actually butch through muscled bodies or tattoos and yet the extreme form of masculinity displayed by gay men can be seen as camp due to its very exaggeration. Nevertheless even if this type of hyper-masculinity can be seen as camp as Edward argues, then it is worth considering here

for a moment if this subverts the uber-masculinity which my respondents suggest is foregrounded in the episode. Indeed, camp has been mentioned a number of times by my respondents in relation to the Captain's Jack and John and *Torchwood* as a whole, and in that sense deserves attention.

### **Hyper-masculinity, camp and *Torchwood***

There are certainly elements of *Torchwood* that can be interpreted as camp in terms of its association to gender norms and in relation to notion of camp as a 'style'. This has been identified by respondents through the sexual innuendos in the narrative, through Captain John's outfit referencing the 'campness' of 80s new romanticism, and the inclusion of John Barrowman and James Marsters with their extra-textual cult camp associations to musicals and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But it is also evinced through the 'playfulness' of the text in general seen through, for example, comments about fancying poodles or the inclusion of the blowfish alien character. Of course once we venture into the playful, ironic and most of all incoherent world of camp we face the challenges that Medhurst (2001) discusses with regard to definition, 'camp is a set of attitudes...a raise of the eyebrow, a great pink butterfly...that just won't be pinned down' (29). Medhurst also points out whether or not we believe it is style that can be reproduced broadly and appropriated by women, men and outside queer culture, it is often seen and used as a subversion of gender (1997: 276). In this way, camp as has been thought about in a number of ways from Isherwood's insistence that true camp is 'High camp' which he would suggest is the 'emotionality to enjoy ballet or baroque art' and is different to 'low camp' which is the young man with a peroxide hairdo and a feather boa (Bergman, 1993:4). Bergman suggests that Isherwood's distaste for low camp is associated with a desire to distance himself from effeminacy. Camp therefore has been seen as an attitude, a sensibility but also one that is captured as style or edifice but one that is often seen as oppositional to masculinity.

However, even if we read the series as camp, or allow for an element of subversion of the extreme forms of masculinity on display, it does not change what the representation suggests about men. Be it within the remit of camp or in relation to bisexual, gay, straight, queer or fluidly sexual men; it associates the 'fun', multi-sexual

action orientated leading men with a more familiar patriarchal form of masculinity which foregrounds lack of emotional commitment, lack of sensuality and the dominance of men. This notion that some forms of masculinity can be interpreted as reified, or positioned as more senior to other forms of masculinity in the episode, also did not go unnoticed by my participants.

### **Hierarchy of masculinities**

In one particular focus group, two participants identified that they perceived there to be a hierarchy of masculinity at play in the *Torchwood* text screened:

Grp 4 – Nick: ‘I didn’t actually feel that liberated. I thought it was nice that it was going on in the background but that’s what I focused on. What I really focused on was those relationships between the men and hierarchy of the masculinity and I think actually I felt as somebody who is not necessarily like kind of a big, you know, alpha male kind of thing, felt quite ... actually you are reinforcing that in this so if you want to be, you know. That it’s okay for big alpha male gays to go out and do what they want and be promiscuous and, you know, focus on fighting over the slightly effeminate men that for me was quite disempowering actually’.

Debbie: ‘Yes’.

Moderator: ‘Okay’.

Debbie: ‘I can relate to that. Yeah, there’s an element of ... why I said what I said, it might sound a contradiction but that makes me think there’s an element of discomfort that you also feel when you watch it partly from the roles, the kind of male and female roles, there’s something you think no ...’

Of course this is only two respondents in one focus group. However, this particular interpretation is useful when analysing *Torchwood* and the representations of men and masculinities. After all some respondents identified that there was a ‘softer’ masculinity at play. I noted earlier that set against the tropes of ‘hyper-masculinity’



there is also a 'camp' undertone to the series (particularly series one and two and the episode screened). If we consider the above respondent's interpretation of a hierarchy of masculinity alongside the foregrounding of uber-masculinity as framed by the set piece of the fight scene, I would argue that it suggests some forms of masculinity are still prioritised. While this might be camp, the foregrounding of hyper-masculinity over softer forms of masculinity, the absence of female bonding, relating or (human-to human) relationships would suggest that discourses of femininity (or those aspects which are often allocated as feminine) are almost absent in this episode. In this way, it reflects Connell's (1995) arguments around masculinity. He suggests that masculinity is hegemonic in the Gramscian sense; we all agree to certain aspects of it implicitly even if we do not live up to its standards. In his conception of masculinity some forms are valued in society over others with gay masculinity being placed lower on the pecking order than 'straight' masculinity and the feminine or camp forms of masculinity also appearing further down the hegemonic ladder. In this way, then, hyper-masculinity in Connell's perception is a route for gay men to align themselves closer with more dominant forms of hegemonic 'straight' masculinity. As Tim Edwards suggests in his summary of studies around the emergence of the gay clone or butch gay masculine identity:

'what these studies...illustrated...was the connection of gay men's sexual practices with questions of masculinity, not only reinforcing the stereotype that men are simply more promiscuous than women, but also in the sense that the clone not only donned a masculine appearance but practised a stereotypically masculine sexuality that was divorced from emotional commitment and intimacy, a form of sexual expression so minimal that even conversation could destroy it' (2006: 87)'.

The key elements of gay masculinity as described by Edwards overlay particularly accurately to some of the readings of the text by my participants. There might not be any intention to portray the two leading men in the series as gay men. However, I would suggest even if we read these depictions as 'fluid sexual men' the implications of the foregrounding of this type of masculinity, in terms of gender, queer and politics of the sexes are similar. It reminds us as Segal suggests that 'although the persecution

of homosexuals is usually the act of men against a minority of other men, it is also the forced repression of the 'feminine' in all men' (1990:16). And, in this case seemingly it can be seen through audience interpretations and my own textual analysis that the 'feminine' and traits considered to be less traditionally 'masculine' have lower priority in a TV text.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I wanted to consider how the depiction of women, men and gender in *Torchwood* might inter-relate with the positioning of the show and my respondents reading of the series as sexually liberal. I attempted to chart a course through the murky definitional and discursive waters of gender and representation of the sexes. Of course, while we can attempt to analyse these strands separately, and should aim to do so in order to be as clear as we can about our own terms, the difficulty of the endeavour is the conflation of gender, sex and sexuality which is continually being reproduced in media and culture. It is a paradox that what we want to understand and liberate ourselves from, through the study of gender and sex, is often implicit in those analyses. It is like a shadow of what we are analysing; only visible sometimes and therefore it escapes our thinking. Nevertheless, I have tried to separate the portrayal of women, men and their bodies from wider depictions of gender ('masculine'/feminine traits) noting that these are different things. Some of the powers of discourses of gender come from the way they are reinvented. Masculinity taking on elements of what might have been seen as more 'feminine' but still managing to coalesce as masculinity and be related to being a man. Following Jackson's argument discourses and subjectivities of gender can be seen as separate from the institutions of heterosexuality, but they are still part of the 'system' that keeps some of those heteronormative, homonormative (Duggan, 2002) and patriarchal institutions dominant. It is this trick of gender that makes it so important to analyse.

With this notion of gender and the representation of women and men in mind, I have argued that broadly women are under-represented in the episode screened (and in some ways through my own textual experiences across series one and two). While women are able to be active in the diegesis therefore continuing the trend for female

characters to be seen as challenging stereotypes of passivity or helplessness, they only seem to be able to do that in the 'idealised' female body. Indeed, any activity that the female characters win seems to be undermined by men in the series highlighted by Gwen's failed attempts to lead the team. Moreover, a corollary of these more familiar gendered stereotypes is the heteronormative male/female binary evinced through the visual pattern of male/female in promotional materials and visual set-pieces in the series. In this way, while women might be active they are still sub-textually and often narratively paired with or beaten by men.

Given that my interpretation of the text and the participant's feedback suggests that women are sidelined in the narrative, I then considered how men and masculinity were portrayed. There are broadly at least two forms of masculinity on offer; firstly a more traditional idea of 'manly men' or 'tough masculinity' and secondly a softer form of masculinity. I have argued that the tough form of masculinity can be seen to be subverted at least to some extent by the portrayal of less 'tough' men and by the camp undertone to the series. However, the political potential of these representations is limited due to foregrounding of hyper-masculinity by literally linking the display of hyper-masculinity in the key fight scene to the title of the episode. It is further problematised by the notion that the two leading men in the text are aliens or monstrous, even 'godlike' as described by a participant, therefore sub-textually prioritising the leading men's form of masculinity. When we add the sexual dimension to this picture it is hard not to match this form of masculinity to current dominant versions of hyper-masculinity in British gay sub-culture. In this way, despite an ostensible fluid sexuality portrayed in the show a more familiar 'homonormative' (Duggan, 2005) gay male identity can be seen. All in all, whether seen through the lens of hyper-masculinity in gay sub-culture or as the fetishisation of more traditional tropes of masculinity in general, softer 'masculine' or 'feminine' traits, and women are lower in a narrative and sub-textual hierarchy, in the eyes of my respondents and me in this episode at least.

### **‘COS’ THAT’S HOW IT IS IN THE FUTURE’: *TORCHWOOD*, FLUID SEXUAL REPRESENTATION AND GENRE**

If, in the last two chapters, I analysed my audience responses through the specifics of sex, sexuality and gender, in this section of the thesis I want to consider these elements generically. After all, it would be difficult to consider *Torchwood* and its depiction of sexuality and gender without asking about the pressures of genre in terms of the way characters are represented. *Torchwood* is often referred to as a science fiction series by both the media and its producers, but where does it fit into the long history of British TV science fiction in terms of gendered sexual representation. It has been argued (Kuhn, 1990, Pearson, 2003, Riemer, 1986) that science fiction often enables us to imagine possibilities, a space for creating visions of what the human race could become both positively and negatively. We can say that in terms of sexuality the *Torchwood* narrative transports ideas of fluid sexuality from Captain Jack’s 51<sup>st</sup> century to our own world. However, a reading of the show as science fiction is complicated by close textual analysis and by audience readings of the series and is therefore reductive when analysing representations of sexuality generically. While there might be element of *Torchwood*’s sexual representations being enabled by science fiction tropes if we start to question the show’s classification as such how then do we read sexuality and gender? Indeed if we think about the series as part of an ever-growing canon of ‘queer TV’ where does it fit in this sense? In a broader context while there has been much consideration of ideas of the hybridised TV text, there has been little thinking around audience experiences of this multiplication of genre. How do my participants experience sexuality and gender in relation to the different generic elements at play?

Through audience responses and my own readings of the texts in this chapter I want to suggest that the series is more than much of the media’s classification as science fiction or as ‘sexy *Doctor Who*’. Furthermore, while fluid sexuality in the series is predicated on a narrative of its possibilities in the 51<sup>st</sup> century, it is not a usual trope for mainstream TV and film science fiction. By considering the series from the perspective of the generic elements identified by my audience participants I hope to

highlight that it is significant in terms of sexual representation in terms of its position as a (mostly) science fiction TV text. Its juxtaposition of alien visitations and futuristic technology with the everyday backdrops of Cardiff and Gwen's domestic life, challenges ideas that the series is science fiction alone and therefore enables it to maintain its subversive quality as a liberatory narrative. The series has also been labelled by the media and fans as 'cult', and through audience responses I want to consider how representation of fluid sexuality might (or might not) fit into the show's elevation (or sub-cultural fascination) as a cult series. I want to argue in light of audience responses and my own textual analysis that a nexus of interrelationships between the shows *Doctor Who* connections, its ascension up the BBC channel hierarchy and a self-conscious hope for cult status have influenced the series approach to fluid sexual representation.

I start then, by reviewing what my participants had heard about *Torchwood* previously to consider how genre might have impacted upon their decisions to watch the series. How can we read these audience expectations in terms of way the series was promoted and defined by the media? By considering the various generic forms at play I ask where the series fits into the history of science fiction and queer TV series and what that might mean for its potential position as a liberatory series in terms of sexuality. I then consider how narrative elements of the series have shifted as it has moved up the channel hierarchy and where sexual representation fits into this generic matrix. Finally I look at the notion of 'cult' TV and consider through my own textual analysis and my participant's readings how we might see the series this way and the role that depicting fluid sexuality might play in the programmes construction as 'cult'.

### ***Torchwood*: imagining future sexualities**

*Torchwood* has been positioned variously as a science fiction series in terms of media discourse and reviews<sup>29</sup> but also as a 'sexy *Doctor Who* spin-off'<sup>30</sup> or as 'CSI Cardiff'<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/news/2009/08/18/torchwood-creator-hints-at-fourth-series-115875-21605886/> - accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2011

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3670443/Torchwood-Late-night-Doctor-makes-timely-return.html> - accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2011

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2006/oct/21/tvandradio.theguide> - accessed 11<sup>th</sup> September 2011

Despite this of course, the series links to *Doctor Who*, its inclusion of aliens, advanced technology and 'the time rift', are all key components in placing *Torchwood* at least partially in the canon of TV Science Fiction. Moreover, amongst my participants most of them referred to the show as science fiction even if they then highlighted other generic elements in the series. When asked about the relationship between science fiction and the representation of sexuality in *Torchwood*, many respondents suggested that it certainly enabled the series to imagine a different conception of sexuality and sexual identity:

Pilot – Shauna: 'I think science fiction has this kind of thing where things can happen that would not happen in ordinary life if you like it allows the boundaries to be pushed cos then you can always fall back on it...'

Sarah: 'Yeah, cos' that's how it is in the future'.

Grp 1 - Julie: 'I wonder if it makes it easier because with science fiction you expect a different set of values it provides a backdrop for something like that to happen'.

Robert: 'Yes I think that's true anything goes if you're in a science fiction world so there's no kind of yer you're not surprised by anything that's what science fiction is about isn't it, I mean you may be surprised by it but that's what you're expecting to be surprised'.

Here, then, Shauna highlights that science fiction can show that which would 'not happen' in ordinary life, and discursively constructs science fiction as a safety net for exploration of new ideas through the idea of it being something you can 'fall back on'. Indeed, academic consideration of the genre has on the whole suggested that science fiction is a collective imagination (Riemer, 1986) or a 'literature of ideas' (Pearson, 2003: 149). This assertion about science fiction might seem obvious but as Pearson also notes if ostensibly science fiction is a genre about imagining possibilities then it seems unusual that its attention to the topic of alternative sexualities is limited. Pearson is referring mainly to literature, in her essay on how queer theory can help us to think about science fiction, however, it is a similar picture if we consider the

depiction of sexuality in science fiction film and television. Sobchack (1990) in her review of sex and science fiction film highlights that on the whole sex and sexuality is not depicted. This idea of sexuality being repressed in science fiction was also noted by one of my respondents:

Grp2: Harry: 'I think it's quite interesting as well that usually aliens tend not to have a sexuality really'.

Ben: 'Asexual'.

Harry: 'The only time they have a sexuality is when they encroach upon someone or evade someone or they have to seduce someone to get through the next gateway...with this it seems to be a part of them which makes them more human maybe'.

Here then the respondent notes how 'asexual' aliens usually are. If we consider most science fiction film and television this assertion would seem to be valid. Some of the biggest box office science fiction film texts do not include significant amounts of sexual intercourse or overt alternative sexuality including *The Terminator* (1984), *Alien* (1979), *The Matrix trilogy* (1999-2003)(one short sequence across the three film franchise), *Inception* (2010) and *Avatar* (2009). A similar picture can be seen in TV if we think about British science fiction series which include a sexual element; some of the most significant series of the last 20 years have little or no sex including *Doctor Who* (new series 2005 has more sexual references but little visual enactments), *Life on Mars* (2006), *Ashes to Ashes*<sup>32</sup> (2008) and *Primeval* (2007). A notable exception is perhaps Channel Four's *Misfits* (2009) which foregrounds storylines related to sex. However, while there are moments of playfulness with sexuality including the storyline where Nathan became gay, his transformation was still short lived. So while at least the series played with sexual identity, perhaps even taking up this trope following the success of *Torchwood*, it did not foreground sex and sexuality to the same extent, whereby characters evidently retained their fluid sexuality. In this way, then, it seems that sexuality and sexual identity have not been a key theme for science fiction film or

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<sup>32</sup> *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* are arguably precursors to *Torchwood* in the sense that they mesh science fiction with crime drama however sexuality was not foregrounded in these series.

TV. Indeed my participants also noticed that the sexuality element of *Torchwood* in terms of the science fiction genre was unusual or dealt with differently:

Grp2 - Harry: 'It's whether I thought that sexuality is important in *Doctor Who*

or Star Trek but it isn't really is just are they going to escape it's kind of difficult to separate for me – it seemed kind of unnecessary the sexuality in the genre of the actual piece itself'.

Grp 4 - Debbie: 'Yeah, you don't have many series of science fiction that look at some of the themes there. I mean science fiction when it looks at sex or romance it's very, it's very kind of predictable what's going to happen and while here, yeah, you have a kind of a more open ... things can happen, people are not very clearly defined, as has happened, Captain Jack is not very clearly defined sexually sometimes so that was for me new in science fiction and that'.

In this way, if we say that *Torchwood* has many science fiction elements, in terms of other shows which exhibit similar characteristics it certainly stands out. This would seem significant at least in terms of thinking about science fiction as a genre and its inclusion of issues of sexuality. To a certain extent it challenges ideas put forward by Sobchack (1990) about why sex and sexuality might be missing from science fiction film. She argues that sex and women are repressed in science fiction film and that asexual men are foregrounded. Sobchack suggests that in demoting women to a lower part of the narrative structure, women as a key marker of biological sex are hidden. She utilises psychoanalysis to further her argument, suggesting that the cause of this textual sexual repression is related to the fear of addressing questions which are deep rooted from infancy therefore are biologically connected to women. In her conception the narrative questions in science fiction of 'Where is it/are they from?' are actually sub-conscious questions about 'Where I am from?' She notes 'if these questions were



exposed in their original form, in the 'true speech' that Lacan sees as the unconscious, the genre could not exist at the narrative level as the kind of exploration it is' (114).

*Torchwood*<sup>33</sup> challenges some of Sobchack's assertions. The men in the series are certainly not asexual and sexuality as a whole is played with constantly in the narrative through flirtive exchanges as well as multiple kissing/sex scenes throughout the existing four series. Nevertheless there is some saliency with Sobchack's assertions about women in science fiction. As I noted in the previous chapter men are foregrounded particularly in the episode screened and women across the four series rarely lead the team<sup>34</sup>. However, key to Sobchack's argument is the assertion that men are asexual in science fiction because they wish to break free from the biological bonds of the mother/other. Hence sexuality is not ostensible to avoid the inevitable question 'where did I come from?' which could so easily progress from some of science fiction's core narratives of 'where did they/it come from?' The very sexual men in *Torchwood* and the constant presence of sexuality therefore problematises this idea and perhaps points to one of the issues of an over-dependence on psychoanalysis to think through the absence of sexuality in science fiction. Psychoanalysis has been criticised for theoretical underpinnings which rely on heteronormative ideas around biological sex. In this case this seems a reasonable criticism as the men in *Torchwood* are displaying a potential to need women and their sex as well as men which complicates simplistic notions of men trying to disavow 'the mother'. However, as I noted at the beginning of the chapter, if we consider the generic readings of the show from my participants and indeed my own analyses of the text, a reading of the series as only science fiction seems reductive. I want to now consider my audiences interpretations around the genre of the series more carefully to think about how it was positioned by its producers and the media and what the impact was in terms of sexual representation.

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<sup>33</sup> Sobchack, is of course referring to film, and I do accept that there are some differences between the two formats including seriality, nevertheless I would argue that her ideas do apply to TV and therefore can be challenged in that context.

<sup>34</sup> This has been corrected to a certain extent narratively in the fourth season, where Gwen has been allowed to take a much more leading role and Captain Jack is no longer the clear team leader in the same way he was in the first three series. Even in the fourth series however Gwen is not the team leader and Captain Jack and Rex are jostling for position as leaders.

### Science fiction...set in Cardiff?

While most of my focus group participants interpreted the show as science fiction or as relating to *Doctor Who* (and in that sense part of the science fiction genre) this is complicated by their readings that *Torchwood* displayed a number of generic traits:

#### Queer TV

- Grp 3 – Damien: ‘But like it stuck out with me as well both in like just being sexual as being queer sexual but ... and that made me interested but never really interested enough from everything else I heard about the show.’
- CH: ‘So you say it sort of stuck out with you because it was sexual as well as queer sexual ...’
- Damien: ‘Yeah’.
- CH: ‘How had you sort of worked that out? Was that because of what you’d heard or because you’d watch an episode and then, for you, you sort of thought well that’s sexual but it’s also something else or ...?’
- Damien: ‘It was purely the coverage’.

#### Hospital Drama

- Grp1 –Chris: ‘It kept switching genres though elements of science fiction elements of casualty you know oh god we have got ten minutes before this person dies so all these different elements. Again the genre is very fluid as well you can say its science fiction related but there is also all these different elements besides as well which adds to the sense of the fluidity of the sexualities of the main

characters I thought – you know you have bits of the western there too’.

### **Western**

Grp 2 - Harry: ‘I was very aware of that when he walked into the bar at the beginning and it was like the OK coral and he said you can stay you can go etc’.

Shane: ‘I wondered whether he had put them under a spell cos’ until he got out the guns they were loving that’.

Harry: ‘It was cowboys wasn’t it that whole thing.’

Jenny: ‘And the drinking culture the whole drinking thing gotta drink and drink’.

Harry: ‘Yer whisky at the bar’.

### **Welsh**

Grp 1 – Chris: ‘There is a brief focus on regionality as well the welshness of Gwen and her boyfriend is wearing the rugby shirt’.

Harry: ‘It was in Cardiff I know that much’.

Grp 4 – Debbie: ‘Well I always find it funny that they are looking at Cardiff, I mean I lived in Wales for many years of my life and I really liked it was in Cardiff and it was a Welsh character, and then you have this mother that comes down to the place, you always see the location, again that’s back to the earth type of thing, and to me the fact that they put it really away from the norm which is London ...’

CH: ‘Yes’.

Debbie: '... kind of allowed them to then do all the things that you kind of, you know, it's another territory, it's a kind of imagined place, Wales, if you like, from another place, because anything can happen. (laughter) It's a place of jokes as well, it's a kind of place ... it's another 'other' within in the UK and I think that works very well and then if it was in other places I wonder how that would work. Scotland might have that edge, Northern Ireland maybe, but Wales works very well for that so ... and, I don't know, it allows for more humour, I feel, than in Doctor Who and I think it also allows for this moving into this more sexuality territory.'

### **Crime**

Grp2 - Harry: 'Some of the thing in the office was a bit prime suspect for me but between two guys – the sexual tension side of it appeared just like that'.

### **Everyday life**

Grp 1 - Rose: 'I saw the science fiction of the show quite separate to the sexuality side I didn't really see that one covered up the other that's the premise of the show but there is a normality to the show because of its setting and so you don't see it as a doctor stylee or something scientific as *Doctor Who*, it does have a normality to it but I didn't think that science fiction underplayed the sexuality part of the show'.

CH: 'Why do you see it as normal ?'

Rose : 'I think it's the setting and maybe the characters apart from Captain Jack who is quite extraordinary – the other characters are quite ordinary so one is a doctor and form

the other episode I saw I think Gwen used to be a police officer’.

The participants highlighted that there were elements of crime, hospital drama, the western (which would relate specifically to the episode screened) and notions of the ‘everyday’. The focus on the everyday/welsh and hospital drama also counteracts the idea that *Torchwood* is only fantastical and therefore we can only read its representations of fluid sexuality as somehow part of the future/unreal. As one participant notes, for her somehow the welsh element in the show is another part of its embracing of the ‘other’, the ‘other’ in sexual terms but also the ‘other’ of Wales to the rest of the UK. However, in relation to Wales, I would suggest this is a much more grounded and real ‘other’. It is seen as a part of the UK but is often stereotyped as unusual or behind in terms of taste. Welsh people are portrayed as eccentric in *Gavin and Stacy* (2007-) and *Stella* (2012) both recent TV hit shows to feature Wales heavily. However, in both series the tropes of community and camaraderie are highlighted amongst the Welsh, so there is a sense that Wales is seen as living at a slower pace and is holding on to closer social structures. In this way, the genre at play seems to positively ground the unearthly ideas of fluid sexuality helping to make it less unreal. This utilisation of different formats, earthly drama and science fiction can be seen to part of a wider

### **Multiplication of genre**

More broadly we can see that my respondents’ experiences suggest the series is indeed drawing on various generic conventions. Indeed this drive to include a number of genre in a TV series was predicted by Feuer (1992). She suggested in her essay on genre in TV that the changing practices of the viewer to ‘channel-hoppers’ and the multiplication of genre within TV shows could mean that ‘rapid flow from one genre to another will come to represent the typical viewing experience’ (158). This experience of speed in generic change and narrative drive is a discourse that stood out amongst my participants:

Grp 2 - Harry:                    ‘What I thought was interesting is because it was an effects programme I thought the sexuality took a second

place and whatever the sexuality was it took second place to the effects’.

Jenny : ‘It all went so fast that you didn’t have time to appreciate what was going on so if there was going to be a deep and emotional story it was just too fast’.

Harry: ‘Yes there all generally faster now aren’t they.’

Jenny: ‘Yes must be for short attention spans – sometimes the dialogue is going so fast I mean I don’t know if I was the only one.’

Grp 1 -Robert: ‘The reason why I wouldn’t have watched this series is because I really can’t stand this kind of fast moving thing because usually I’m confused by them to be perfectly honest I just can’t follow what’s going on whether I’m getting too old or what.’

In this way, many of my participants noted the fast moving pace of the series. Further analysis of an episode of *Torchwood* highlights the number of generic changes made in the episode screened. It opens with the car chase of the alien blow fish (science fiction/crime), followed by the ‘CSlesque’ opening titles (crime), then, there is the arrival of Captain John through the rift (science fiction) leading to a murder in the first scene (crime). The bar brawl scene is positioned next in the narrative (western). Already there are three genres packed into the first 15 minutes of the episode. These changes are so rapid as to be positively disorientating for one participant Robert, perhaps relating to his older age and ability to decode this type of programme.

Feuer (1992) argues that this generic multiplication is necessary due to the diversification of TV channels available in the UK. This has meant that TV series would have to cater specifically to types of audience members who watched the channel in question and, in this way, all its programming would have to appeal to them. Parks (2003) in her discussion about the depiction of violence in *Buffy* argues that generic hybridity and fluidity are also part of a drive to attract niche audiences – or a TV form

of textual dispersal (Austin, 1999). Programme makers need some narrative guarantees that they can pull on different audience tastes within niche markets, which are already considerably smaller than previous mass audiences, when only four to five analogue channels were available in the UK. It seems that this strategy did not go unnoticed in terms of *Torchwood* by some of my respondents:

Pilot- Lizzie: 'It would be too niche without that (sci-fi), people would think it was a show about sex rather than a show about sci fi. mmmm ... nurr...mmm... I suppose it's sort of how they would interpret it...sort of if you like sci—fi ... errr ... (looks up and frustrated) I can't out what I am thinking...taps her head...laughs'.

CH: 'It's ok it is getting late'.

Shauna: 'You mean if it's a sci-fi show then people who like sci-fi will kind of watch it'.

Lizzie and Shauna are demonstrating an understanding of TV marketing strategies and the importance of genre as part of attracting sufficient audiences. This narrative and promotional technique arguably enabled the BBC to open up the text to a wider audience who might not be so interested in science fiction in general but who could engage with *Doctor Who* or crime-fighting narratives. Ireland (2010) envisages the idea of generic hybridity from the point of view of the narrative. He argues that (the) audience(s) can be seen as a presence in the *Torchwood* text, the author's voice no longer alone in the narrative but in a textual 'fight' with a knowing viewer. He notes for example the self-conscious 'name dropping' included in *Torchwood* such as the *CSI(2000-)* reference which is actually in the narrative of the first episode of series one or references in the same episode to the missing *Torchwood* 4 unit which echoes the storyline in *Babylon 5* (1993-1998) of the missing Babylon 4 space station. In addition to this in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, a holographic projection of Captain John speaks to Captain Jack but at the end the hologram of Captain John bends down and says '*Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi you're my only hope*'. In this way, all at once appealing to a general science fiction audience but also parodying the scene and in that sense

sparring with *Star Wars* fans. Ireland suggests that this is part of the auteur's<sup>35</sup> drive to play with the audience. In doing so Ireland also implicitly suggests that the production team is drawing these audiences into this fight and, in this way, adds to the argument that the series at least in season one (BBC Three) and season two (BBC Two) was aware of its need to pull on various audience tastes within a niche market. It had to 'spar' with *Doctor Who* fans but also with those more interested in gritty crime series and more general science fiction fans. This is evinced through the various references made both in the narrative and the dark mise-en-scène of the series reminiscent of so many industrial science fiction cityscapes in film including *Dark City* (1998), *Batman* (1989) and *Bladerunner* (1982). This technique of drawing in audiences, perhaps capitalising on what will generate the most audience ratings within the tighter parameters of the niche digital channel, can also be seen when we consider the promotion of the series, on-going unfolding narrative and my participants' experiences of the series advertising and publicity.

### **Media promotion of the series**

When we consider the discourses my focus group participants use in terms of what they knew about the series before they watched it, the way it was positioned by the media seems to be partly evident in their responses:

Grp3 – Damian: 'I heard about it when it first launched as a spin-off and I was a bit patchy on the first series of the new Doctor Who so I never knew Jack as a character and then when I saw the spin-off I was like oh that might be interesting, it's a bit more adult, and then I saw one of the and I just missed it and then I saw the first ...'

CH: 'What had other people heard?'

Grp 3 – Mandy: 'Only that it had lots of sex in it and lots of homosexuality ...'

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<sup>35</sup> I would challenge Ireland on this and would argue more reasonable to think of this as perhaps a meaning encoded by the whole production team as we can't know if this was a decision made by the auteur.



Grp 4 – Nick: ‘I didn’t know what it was until I read somewhere that it was a spin-off of Doctor Who. I never used to watch it and I thought oh I love Doctor Who I might as well start watching this now’.

In this way, while not all my participants had seen the series, of those who had many were drawn into the series through its links to Doctor Who or the promise of sexual content. Altman (1999) suggests one of the functions of genre is for the audience to be able to choose whether or not they want to take part in a text. Some elements of this can be seen in the way *Torchwood* was positioned in promotional materials by the BBC when it first aired in 2006. Trailers shown for the series focused on highlighting that the series included Captain Jack Harkness, a character who had featured heavily in season one and two of the revitalised *Doctor Who* therefore playing up its links to the series. However, the sexual content of the show was not foregrounded in the trailers, instead, the focus was on characters, the ‘CSlesque’ crime fighting tropes of wide cityscapes, fast moving camera shots, references to police/Government agencies and science fiction elements including images of aliens. The promotion of the series at the ‘mainstream’ or ‘wider-audience’ level, through advertising on BBC One for example, therefore positioned the series very much as a *Doctor Who* science fiction spin-off played out in a crime serial format. This strategy implicated *Doctor Who* followers, arguably a sizeable potential market given *Doctor Who* ratings<sup>36</sup>. This was also highlighted by more specific comments made by my participants:

Pilot - Nikki: ‘Yeah I’m not sure BBC would have put it on if it wasn’t related to *Doctor Who*’.

Shauna: ‘I agree with you, that show is silly, for what it’s worth...but I think it’s worth remembering that it’s a spin off from *Doctor Who* and *Doctor Who* is really silly as well. But *Torchwood* is for adults and they say fuck and hit

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<sup>36</sup> *Dr Who* is ranked at number 6 in the BBC Barb ratings list drawing in 8.10 million viewers on the 28<sup>th</sup> August 2011 - <http://www.barb.co.uk/report/weeklyTopProgrammesOverview/?report=weeklyterrestrial&requesttimeout=500> – accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

each other. You know and it shows naked peoples arses thrusting so...'

Ross: 'I could really tell it was spin-off from *Doctor Who*'.

However, it is not surprising that many of my respondents also stated that they had heard about the show's sexual content despite the 'high-level' advertising promotion of the show not focusing on this element. The media reviewing the series very much headlined *Torchwood's* sexuality helping to promote its adult content potentially where the BBC preferred to avoid foregrounding this in order to reduce audience backlash. Moreover, sexuality was still promoted indirectly by the series producers through interviews with Russell T. Davies<sup>37</sup>. It has continued to be a 'low-level' promotion technique throughout the four seasons of the series seen through continued interviews with Russell T. Davies or John Barrowman where the subject of the sexual narrative is addressed<sup>38</sup>. In this way, the series producers still courted 'queer' and 'queer friendly' audiences through its liberal sexual narrative, playing up its role as 'queer' or 'gay' TV. However, the idea that there is a political element to the inclusion of liberal sexual content is actually denied by Russell T. Davies although of course this is as reported by the media. If we are to believe these reports he suggests that it was to make the series interesting narratively<sup>39</sup>. Regardless of motives, this strategy has enabled the series to pick up a large gay or queer following seen through the amount of reporting by the queer media (*Pink Paper* and *Gay Times*) around the series, and through the proliferation of fan forums in queer digital spaces. Therefore the show's multiple generic elements have been utilised in different ways by the production team and by the media but invariably it has opened up the text to as wide a range of audiences as possible. However, further analysis of some my respondents feedback suggests that there have been shifts in the generic elements in *Torchwood* as it progressed up the BBC channel hierarchy. I want to consider these now in general

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Russell T. Davies in October 2006 edition of *Gay times* (pp 337) – referenced from <http://www.afterelton.com/TV/2006/10/torchwood.html?page=0,1> – accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

<sup>38</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/oct/20/bbc.television> and <http://emily-jane.net/2008/09/17/russell-t-davies-interview-pre-torchwood-airing/> and <http://www.afterelton.com/tv/2009/7/russeltdavies> and <http://www.nme.com/filmandtv/news/torchwood-sexuality-will-not-be-toned-down-for-us/217139> - accessed 12th September 2011.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/oct/20/bbc.television> - accessed 12th September 2011.

terms, but also more precisely in relation to the positioning of sexual representation in the show's generic matrix.

### **Genre and sex 'changing' across the channels**

Some of my participants who had seen the series before or were more committed viewers noted that it had changed from series to series in terms of genre and representation of sexuality:

Pilot – Martha: 'In the early series everyone is bisexual and it's all very edgy but the later on they seemed to put less of that in...in my experience – it's almost like that was a way of marking as an adult'.

Phil: 'Yes, and the new series (*referring then to Series 3*) they did last year – it was a lot more serious and the sexuality wasn't as pronounced but maybe that's cos' it was short. I got hints of it but...'

*My italics for context*

Nikki: 'I think that's cos it was primetime'. (*latest series*)

CH: 'And it moved to BBC1 didn't it'.

Nikki: 'It was on at 7pm or something'.

My respondents are highlighting what they note is a shift in the generic make-up of the series from series two to three moving it away from its 'edgy' tone and reducing the sexual content of the series. Indeed, while the series began its life as dark and gritty, seen narratively through the repeated use of night-time scenes, cityscapes and as noted by Ireland (2010) the seeming never ending heavy rain, if we look closely at the text, its generic make up changed as it climbed up the BBC channel rankings. Ireland rather astutely notes that the number of references to *Doctor Who* escalated considerably in series 3 once the series was promoted to a prime time BBC1 spot. It was once again aware of its audience and its move to BBC1 meant it had a higher profile but also needed to draw a broader range of viewers; in that sense, younger

adult *Doctor Who* fans might not be enough. Instead, it would need to pull in teenage *Doctor Who* fans allowed to stay up and watch it post 9pm, as well as older *Doctor Who* fans who might have shunned the series when it was part of the younger BBC3 schedule and the more alternative BBC2 TV listings. In terms of sexual content, an analysis of the themes of the episodes in series two, versus series three, further highlights the way sexuality was positioned or dealt with differently. The opening of season two, which is also the episode screened for this research, as already noted contained a number of references to fluid sexuality as well as both heterosexual and homosexual kisses. In particular Captain John is shown to be 'multisexual' through his kissing of both Captain John and Gwen in the same episode. The fluid sexual tropes continue throughout the season with references to sex included in the episode '*Meat*' and '*From Out of the Rain*'.

### **'Everything Changes'...in season three?**

The opening of season three stands in stark contrast to the second season, both in general generic terms, but also in relation to sexuality. For the first time in its narrative history the term 'bent' is used by Ianto's sister, labelling Ianto's sexuality. There is an attempt in the diegesis to resist this when Ianto insists that it is not men but Captain Jack he has fallen for. This is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, not only does it bring the fluid sexuality of the first two seasons to an end by firmly placing sexuality back in the realms of more traditional notions of sexual identity, it also in some ways denies the validity of the notion of fluid sexuality, by suggesting that it is more acceptable because it is a person that Ianto is attracted to rather than anything physical. Secondly it also brings the series back to a more conventional trope of past gay and queer TV – the 'coming out' ritual. Moreover, series three then also seems to follow another unfortunate reoccurring theme of past gay representation – Ianto as the new queer who has just come out gets killed at the end of season three, causing an outcry amongst fans and sparking the creation of a memorial at the quayside in Cardiff. In this way, Ianto 'got it' and followed so many (passive identified) queers in film and TV before him. While it could be argued that Tosh and Owen were also killed in the previous series, I would suggest that it is significant that Ianto 'comes out' in this season and then is written out by the end of the same season leaving

Captain Jack as the only central fluid sexual character in season four (Gwen no longer has fluid sexual experiences). Amy-Chinn in her analysis of the representation of bisexuality in the series (2012) also notes that the series became more heteronormative as it progressed from BBC Three to BBC One. Davies and Needham (2009) have suggested that the move from 'gay' representation to 'post-gay' TV representation can perhaps be characterised by a shift away from 'identity' focused themes including coming out, towards a more taken for granted approach to sexuality – a move that the production team and the BBC seemed to have made prior to series three. However, once the series moved to BBC One they took a metaphorical step backwards in terms of sexual representation. Indeed, the generic make-up of the series changed in other ways which are not directly of sexual representation, but are related to it.

### **Out of the (fluid sexual) dark, into the (heteronormative) light**

This move to more normative notions of sexuality and sexual identity, is coupled with a shift to family orientated tropes. This change starts boldly with the series three overarching sub-title '*Children of Earth*', firmly rooting the series into familial structures, something that previous series had only attempted to do through Gwen and Rhys's heterosexual relationship. Furthermore, the themes of (heteronormative) family reoccur throughout episode one with both Jack and Ianto (now a couple with the storyline focusing on their struggle to deal with the new 'couple' status) both visiting their families which we were never privy to in previous seasons. Gone are the heavy rains and wide night-time cityscapes, reminiscent of the aforementioned dark and brooding industrial dystopian science fiction narratives. Instead, in season three, *Torchwood* steps into wider popular culture in its new primetime BBC1 position, and narratively literally steps out into the light by setting most of the action in the daytime. If we consider the remit of BBC Three/BBC Two versus BBC1 the changing dynamics of genre and sexual representation might not be so surprising. The table below shows the aims or priorities of the three channels which *Torchwood* has inhabited.

### **BBC3 Three**

**Aim:** 'BBC Three is a mixed genre channel for young audiences.

We have three key priorities:

- The channel needs to be disciplined about focusing on the young - its centre of gravity will be 16-34 year-olds: people who are young in spirit and mindset.
- BBC Three is 'Never Afraid to Try new Stuff' and that's why we will continue to innovate with breakthrough comedy, stand-out entertainment, brave documentary and intelligent factual formats. Our content needs to have potential to innovate across platforms.
- BBC Three should provide an environment for the development of new ideas and talent and for existing talent to take risks, becoming a genuine laboratory for BBC One and BBC Two.'

**Source:** <http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/tv/what-we-want/service-strategies/bbc-three.shtml> - accessed 12th September 2011

## **BBC2**

### **Aims:**

- BBC Two is a mainstream channel. Distinguished by a spirit of bold creativity as its defining characteristic and armed with curiosity and wit, we are here to provide stimulating television to a broad but demanding audience.
- We embrace all genres but factual programming remains integral to our purpose. We aspire to be a place where viewers expect to find the finest arts, history, science and human interest documentaries, as well as the best-loved formatted leisure programmes anywhere in British television - output that is intelligent and rich in content, yet thoroughly accessible and entertaining.
- In comedy and entertainment, BBC TWO encourages creative risk-taking by commissioning series of real distinctiveness and originality. Likewise, we relish drama that chimes with the channel's core values: ambitious, stimulating, emotionally engaging single plays and series that are both powerfully expressive of our times and very enjoyable to watch.

Source : <http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/tv/what-we-want/service-strategies/bbc-two.shtml> - accessed 12th September 2011

#### BBC1

- **Aims:** BBC One is about aiming for the very best in production values, story-telling and talent in all genres. We want a rich-mix of programmes with scale and ambition that will appeal across the range to everyone in the UK.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/tv/what-we-want/service-strategies/bbc-one.shtml> - accessed 12th September 2011

The key differences here are that BBC Three has a focus on a younger audience and is a developmental area for the other BBC channels. BBC Two notes in its aims that it wants to be 'bold and creative' whereas BBC One needs to appeal 'across the range to everyone in the UK'. In this way, we can see how the pressures of escalation up the channel hierarchy also exert generic forces and that caught in this interplay between the production team, the BBC and the need to draw in ever more wider audiences is the need to alter sexual narrative tactically. In some ways, it is positive that the production team were able to continue themes of sexuality and sexual identity into the BBC One version of the show. Perhaps reflecting a more emotional element to alternative sexualities and sexual identity which I suggested my participants implied is important through their group talk. Indeed, the third series was reported by the media as a surprise success for the BBC<sup>40</sup>. However, it seems the more radical and challenging ideas of fluid sexuality had to be sacrificed for this move. In this way, we can say that while alternative sexuality at the beginning of *Torchwood*'s televisual life was a way to draw in niche groups from an already tightly defined digital audience, in the short life of ground breaking fluid sexual representation, it has already become TV commodity, disposable for the opportunity of top channel ratings.

So far, then, in this chapter when thinking about *Torchwood* in generic terms even if we assume the series to be predominantly science fiction, analysis of audience responses and a consideration of the wider canon of science fiction TV suggests that *Torchwood* is in fact leading the way in changing its approach to sexual representation

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.kasterborous.com/2010/07/torchwood-surprise/> - accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

in this area. However, one reason why this might not be as significant a step as we might think it seems is that audience readings of genre for *Torchwood* highlight the multiplication of genre in its narrative. It is more than science fiction; it is also grounded by themes of the everyday. This both challenges ideas that the sexual representation is invalidated by tropes of the fantastical but also perhaps reduces the possibility that *Torchwood* can be seen as ground breaking in science fiction canonical terms. Sexuality is one strand of this genre multiplication and has been used, if only at a low level by the production team and the BBC to help draw in niche audiences; a strategy which seems evident at least in responses from the participants I met with. Indeed, it seems that some of my respondents noticed that the approach to sexuality in the narrative changed as it moved from BBC Two to BBC One. I have argued that fluid sexuality as a relatively new form of sexual representation has already been commodified, in its conversion from radical to a more recognisable normative set of TV tropes such as 'coming out' or placing the sexual narratives into heteronormative familial structures. In the next section of this chapter, then, I want to consider the idea of the role of sexual representation as a TV commodity further. While it might be difficult to classify the idea of cult as genre, it is certainly a term of classification used variously by the media, producers and viewers. *Torchwood* over its four seasons has seemingly been allocated to this rather complicated classification (or possibly even genre) of the 'cult' text. The slipperiness of the term 'cult' and its use by the media and producers too as part of marketing strategy makes the idea of 'cult' problematic. Rather than attempting to impose a definition of cult on the series, I follow Le Guern's approach and see 'cult' as a social construction (2004), one which we all sign up to and recognise but also one that is implicated in the narrative and the media but inevitably needs the audience. I want to discuss in what ways we can see *Torchwood* as a cult text, from my participants' point of view, the media's use of the term and in terms of narrative features to consider how fluid sexual representation might fit into the nexus of cultural meanings and interpretations that seems to make up cult TV.



### ***Torchwood* as 'cult' and 'culting' *Torchwood***

A key challenge for academics (Le Guern, 2004 and Jancovich and Hunt, 2004) who have addressed what makes a TV series cult, has been attributing who endows a text with cult status and what the process entails. The origin of the word – 'cult' – has religious or faith orientated connotations. This of course ties into the idea of fans of 'cult' shows such as *Nighty Night* (2004-2005) or *Star Trek* (1966-1969) which spawn dressing up parties and recounting of particular lines amongst fan groups. It is difficult not to make comparisons of ritual between those kinds of activities, and for example attending mass where particular religious sets of words are spoken again and again. But as Le Guern highlights in his essay on the topic, this would be to oversimplify the cultural process, and its antecedents, that work together to help construct the term as it is used in everyday life. Both Le Guern and Jancovich and Hunt note that as well as the activity of fans or consumers of cult texts including shared knowledge or fetishisation of elements of the text which can be seen as contributing to its 'cult' status, TV or film is often allocated this status by the media. This certainly seems to be the case in relation to *Torchwood*. The series is now referred to by the media as 'cult' as a matter of course when reviewing or discussing latest news around it<sup>41</sup>. In this way, then, while elements of the series might have come together to help it gain 'cult' status in the media, the idea of the series as 'cult' is also fuelled by the media. Teasing out what comes first in this process of cultural reproduction is probably almost impossible. However, we can say that there are elements of a TV show relating to narrative and consumption practice which seem to contribute to its likelihood to be assigned the rather ephemeral label of 'cult'. Certainly some of the fan practices inspired by *Torchwood*, such as the creation of the Ianto memorial near the Millenium Centre in Cardiff would suggest that it has become 'cultish' with fans. It is also

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.culthub.com/torchwood-miracle-day-preview/2110/> - accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

<http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/tv/s8/torchwood/news/a84205/cult-spy-icon-ianto-jones-torchwood.html> - accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

<http://www.welovecult.com/2011/review/torchwood-immortal-sins/> - accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

<http://www.cultfiction.com.au/torchwood/> - accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/tv/3511510/Talkin-bout-my-regeneration.html> - accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

discussed extensively online alongside its parent show *Doctor Who*, a show with a long 'cult' history. However, other academics suggest that there are generic features which can help to identify whether a TV series or film is cult and I want to think about that more carefully now in relation to *Torchwood*.

### Textual cultism

Eco (1985) suggests that a cult movie text is made so by its inclusion of generic elements of just about every other film. He does so by analysing *Casablanca* (1942) and highlighting from this review the 'archetypes' present across the film which mirror many other genres. If we pursue his argument *Torchwood* seems to follow his definition. As highlighted, it contains an array of TV texts within its own diegesis including hospital drama, soap, western, crime thriller, science fiction and comedy. Indeed notions of the cult can be seen in some of the ways that my participants conceived of the series.

Grp 3 - Rich: 'Yeah it would make me think of a comic book ...'

Andrew: 'Yeah'.

Rich: '... to me, it just goes bang, bang, bang'.

Sally: 'That one scene and maybe because he's obviously the Spike character from Buffy ...'

Greg: 'Yeah'.

Andrew: 'Oh yeah'.

Mandy: 'Oh, was it?'

Sally: '... that scene was exactly from Buffy, when he and Buffy and, you know, do the fighting, that sort of reminded me of it'.

Mandy: 'Was he a vampire or something?'

Sally: 'He was Spike, yeah, from Buffy'.

Mandy: 'Spike yeah, yeah'.

Sally: 'But they have a scene like that where they're kissing and they're fighting and I was like oh that's kind of the same'.  
(laughter)

CH: 'So it's been done. (laughter)'.

Damien: 'I seen it coming with it being type cast'.

Sally: 'Yeah'.

Here then participants highlight the 'comic book' like nature of the series. This I want to suggest is an important comparison; comic books are well-known for their 'cult' status. Many comics we think of from *The Beano* (1938- ) to *Silver Surfer* (1968) to *2000AD* (1977- ) have variously been classified as cult. Moreover, my participants go on to talk about the way the show interrelates with other science fiction and indeed cult texts including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Respondents also mentioned that the series is somehow 'cool'. In this way, then, while none of my participants defined *Torchwood* as a 'cult' series, they did recognise the references made to other 'cult' series such as 'Buffy' through the inclusion of James Marsters in the series and even read that some of the scenes seem to be a further inference to the series. In terms of genre then, earlier I noted how there are self-conscious elements of the text which reference science fiction series helping to appeal to relevant audiences. Moreover, this inclusion of references is also to TV texts which have been variously labelled as cult and therefore can be seen as another self-conscious effort to 'mark' the series as part of the 'cult' canon. My participants also noted other elements of the text which made it 'stand' out for them and I want to think about this next in relation to 'cult'.

### When the absurd becomes cult

Jancovich and Hunt (2004) assert that one of the ways a TV text becomes cult is the process of opposition to the mainstream<sup>42</sup>. *Torchwood* can also be said to fit into this definition in some ways through its original positioning as a BBC Three programme. Here the series as I mentioned earlier was able to position itself as 'innovative' and go against the grain of its parent show *Doctor Who* through the use of violence, gore and sexuality. Indeed some of my respondents highlighted that they found the foregrounding of sexuality and a 'playfulness' as being unusual and for some meant that the text wasn't very palatable:

Grp 3 CH: 'Okay. Alright, so some people haven't really watched much of it or Sally hasn't watched it at all, so how would you describe it? What's the sort of thing that might stick out for you uppermost I guess, now you've watched an episode?'

Sally: 'The sexual references were almost farcical, there were just so many and so just ridiculous (laughter) that it was hard to take them seriously. It didn't feel like a sexy show it just kind of felt ridiculous'.

CH: 'Okay'.

Sally: 'And he just came across – I don't know what the character is normally like – but what his sexual preference was was almost irrelevant, he hit on three people in one show ...'

CH: 'Yeah'.

Sally: '... it was just like kind of it just seemed kind of farcical'.

In this way, then, for some participants the sexuality of the show and some of the 'farce' in the series lowered the quality of the text. It made the text seem 'ridiculous'. For others in my groups this reduced the impact of the narrative in terms of politics:

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<sup>42</sup> A term which is also problematic and slippery as acknowledged by Jancovich and Hunt, but for the time being here I use the term to refer to the way fans of cult and the media position a text against popular shows which might be seen as less innovative or do not inspire 'cultish' fan reaction.

- Sally: 'I think actually this kind of relates to the previous question as well, I think sci-fi is actually a very good medium to make social commentary ...'
- CH: 'Yeah'.
- Sally: '... because there is willing suspension of disbelief when you start watching it and I think a lot of good sci-fi shows like Battlestar Galactica or Star Trek do have that engagement and I think there's an episode of Next Generation where Riker falls in love with an asexual being'.
- Mandy: 'Oh God yeah, yeah and then she executed or ...'
- Sally: '... yeah for doing something completely ...'
- Mandy: '... she's re-programmed'.
- Sally: '... she's re-programmed'.
- Mandy: 'Yeah to think like everyone else'.
- Sally: 'But in this one sexuality is seen like a plot device rather than a commentary and so it kind of left you feeling nothing'.
- CH: 'Okay, so for you sort of you didn't relate it back to any kind of your ideas about identity or sexuality or anything like that it kind of ... there was a sort of a door maybe metaphorically closed ...'
- Sally: 'Yeah'.
- CH: '... because you just thought it was a bit sort of throw-away'.
- Sally: 'It was just so ridiculous in one extreme ...'
- CH: 'Okay'.
- Sally: '... that it didn't become that social commentary thing that other sci-fi programmes do very well'.

CH: 'Okay'.

Mandy: 'It was as bit in your face wasn't it? It was like boom, too much'.

In this exchange my focus group respondents suggest that the sexuality stood out, but that it was not embedded in relationships inferring that would be a more political approach and by definition therefore of 'higher quality'. While one reading of this is that the series does not tackle sexuality in a more serious way because it is taking a liberatory approach to highlight that sex and sexuality can be separate from emotions and relationships, another is that this is an unusual and therefore distinctive approach to portrayal of these issues. This also feeds into Le Guern's ideas of what cult is where he suggests that one element that contributes to making a text cult is the way consumers read it: "this consists not of mistaking 'operetta for great music', to borrow a phrase from Pierre Bourdieu, but of finding interest and value in the material that critics and good "taste" have left by the wayside: defects become qualities, kitsch becomes a stylistic perfect, and stereotypes become a makers mark" (2004: 10). The rather outlandish approach to sexuality highlighted by constant innuendoes and even references to sex with poodles, immediately marks the programme as unusual and as some of the comments by my respondents suggests off putting to some. However, as Le Guern also notes what can be seen as 'low quality' or farcical to some can be read by others as interesting. It seems, with *Torchwood* as a programme originally located televisually on BBC3, it was able to carry this tension in the text off. As its growing audience ratings demonstrate, it was then able to build from an outlandish innovative series on BBC3 towards a successful 'mainstream' series on BBC1. In this way, a combination of positioning of the show on a youth orientated channel, the use of 'cult' tropes including references to other 'cult' series, 'cult' science fiction mise-en-scène and the inclusion of fluid sexuality which at times does not always sit naturally with the narrative, all go together to at least give the text 'cult' markers. Indeed, Gwellian-Jones notes in her essay on cult television and sexuality that often in cult TV the 'social' element of heterosexuality such as marriage and domesticity is resisted – she refers to Kirk's continuous search for a girl in *Star Trek* (2002). Moreover, she notes that the alternative to this is same-sex pairing as can be seen in *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-1999) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, although of course these series feature lesbian sex

rather than the fluid sexual encounters in *Torchwood*. In this way, cult TV could be seen as inherently queer as those shows that become 'cult' often have fantastical elements to them. Nevertheless, it is hard to situate at what point a text becomes 'cult'; we can say that 'cult' status seems to be achieved through viewers fetishising texts which are not necessarily intended to be 'cult', but also as part of more deliberate strategies implemented by television companies/broadcasters. I want to consider this briefly in the last section of this chapter.

### **The 'cult' of 'cult'**

In the case of *Torchwood* traits of cult TV texts can be seen in audience reaction, the media's reporting and the narrative. However, a more self-conscious approach to the creation of this text in relation to the 'cult' of 'cult', seems to exist. Indeed, before the series went on air Russell T. Davies himself was reported to have declared aims to make the series cult, and referenced the '*X-Files*' (1993-2002) and '*This Life*' (1996-1997), two other series often referred to as cult, as part of his ambitions<sup>43</sup>. He later denied this assertion<sup>44</sup>. Of course the nature of 'cult' means that what might be an attempt to create 'cult' through the inclusion of radical fluid sexuality, could also be read by many as simply awkward TV. In that sense, cult is still reliant on the audience for its status. Nevertheless arguably fluid sexuality is one element of what has helped *Torchwood* become 'cult' in its original BBC Three and BBC Two positions, and in that sense adds to its 'cult' 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). In this case it helped it progress from BBC Three to BBC One and even against the tide of the economic crisis and cuts to programme making, is at least part of what has helped it survive into season four albeit with additional American funding. In this way, fluid sexuality in *Torchwood* can be seen as 'cult capital', and through its adaption to more conventional tropes of sexual identity in the later two seasons, it has already been commodified as such.

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1500882/Dr-Who-goes-in-search-of-sex-in-Cardiff.html> - accessed 12th September 2011.

<sup>44</sup> <http://live.radiotimes.com/content/show-features/torchwood/russell-t-davies-talks-torchwood/> - accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I wanted to take a broader view of *Torchwood* in terms of genre to ask how it fitted into the canons of science fiction, queer and cult TV. In doing so through analysis of audience responses, it is clear that the show has been variously classified by the media as science fiction or as related to *Doctor Who* but also as 'sexy'. This, in part, through different promotional techniques which I have suggested have helped *Torchwood* survive its inception in a small niche youth orientated digital channel by opening up the text to science fiction, *Doctor Who*, queer and crime drama audiences. It highlights that genre on TV is a complicated term which often refers more to genres in TV series, than to how we can classify the genre of a TV series. Nevertheless it is hard to ignore the predominant science fiction tropes of the series and its relationship to *Doctor Who*, and in this sense I have argued that *Torchwood* becomes a stand out text in relation to innovative sexual representation in TV science fiction. The mixing of genres with more everyday themes through its regional base, hospital drama and soapy elements dilutes the show's science fiction credentials but challenges ideas that its radical sexual representations are 'out of this world'.

Through my own readings and some of my participants who had greater knowledge of the wider series, I noted that the genre of the series and its sexual representation shifted as it moved from BBC Three up the channel hierarchy to its latest position on BBC1. The dark edgy science fiction/crime and the fluid sexual tropes seemed to shift into brighter more everyday themes rooted in familial narratives and more traditional notions of sexual identity. I have suggested that given the remit of the channels hosting the series, it is not surprising that there have been new generic pressures on the production team which may have influenced the diegesis. It seems that fluid sexual representation has been caught up in the changing generic matrix necessary for niche to 'mainstream' channel hopping.

By tracing this idea through an analysis of the series definition by the media as 'cult', I have suggested that a number of elements of the series can be seen to contribute to its potential cult status. There are fan behaviours which would suggest the series can be seen this way, including perhaps most notably the Ianto memorial in Cardiff. There



are textual features including Eco's ideas around the inclusion of many genres and references to other cult texts. I have suggested that despite the often obvious narrative and marketing strategies pursued by TV companies in order to create the conditions of 'cult', it is difficult to separate 'cult' texts which have been purposefully designed to be so and those which really do only grow from grassroots fan bases. However, there are elements of *Torchwood's* narrative which imply that there is a self-conscious effort by those involved in making the series to make it part of the 'cult' of 'cult'. In the end it is (or should be) the consumers and fans of the series that endow a show with 'cult' status, and I have argued it is some of the unusual features in relation to sexuality that help it to stand out and begin to be seen as 'cult'. In this way, I have suggested fluid sexual representation could be seen as 'cult capital' for the makers of *Torchwood*, and may well be for other future TV channels and producers.

**'I CERTAINLY WOULDN'T WANT TO BE PORTRAYED AS A BORING STRAIGHT PERSON':  
TORCHWOOD, MEANING MAKING AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDERED SEXUAL  
IDENTITIES**

In the last three chapters I have focused on how my participants and I interpreted representations in terms of fluid sexuality, gender and then in relation to genre. In this chapter, I want to shift my attention more squarely on to performances of sexual gendered identity within my focus groups. Recent audience work (Austin, 1999; Thomas, 2002; Radway, 1984) focusing on Film, TV and literature has started to ask how we might see interpretative work in elements of identity that are performed or revealed. In this way, there has been a move in audience studies to start asking not just how we make meanings from texts but also how we might be able to see glimpses of the way they are enacted in identity making or performance. It could be said that some audience studies academics have moved the search for an understanding of media textual interpretation and its role in the reproduction of dominant ideologies into the realm of identity (re)making. For example, the way Radway (1984) highlights how women use romance novels to escape the everyday, in that way revealing some of the 'process' of participating in discourses of romance, where women are defined by a drive to 'find a man'. In this chapter then I want to build on thinking in this area to explore the links between meaning making and identity (re)formation. Utilising the benefit of focus group methodology and its visual/linguistic dynamics, I also bring Butler's ideas around performance, together with theories of self-reflection, to think about how they might enhance our understanding of the space between textual interpretation and gendered sexual identity (re)formation/performance.

Broadly speaking, through four case studies, I argue that by bringing a self-reflexive approach together with performance theory, we can better understand the space between meaning making and gendered sexual identity making and performance. Moreover, I suggest that this approach, an analysis of self-reflection and gendered performance, highlights how media texts are used here, even if in a limited way, in an 'active' sense in the process of self-reflection. In relation to identity, this reinforces

the broad view in media and cultural studies which has become established that identity is a 'process'. However, my participants also reveal a history of identity making and a catalogue of encounters with past discourses of homophobia which have partly shaped their identity choices, and I argue that this challenges reductive notions of identity as in 'flux'.

### **Queer discourses, 'hetero' identity**

Ben, a participant from group two in Brighton, stood out in my focus groups in the way he seemed to reject a traditional heterosexual identity despite being a self-identified 'straight' man. One could argue that Ben might be performing liberal gender and sexual discourses consciously in relation to the presence of two women and three gay men in the research session he attended, and in relation to the local socio-cultural geography of Brighton as a liberal self-proclaimed 'gay capital' (Browne, forthcoming). However, from the beginning of the session, before the group dynamics began to form, Ben marked out that he would take a liberal stance on sexuality:

CH: 'Can I ask why people decided to come along this evening?'

Ben: 'I was asked to come along to but I thought it (*the focus group research*) sounded interesting and fun so wanted to be involved'.

Me: 'What I am interested in then is what people have heard about the show – obviously there is a lot of media around the show before it started you might have heard through friends and so on. Had anyone heard anything particular about the show beforehand''

Ben: 'Just the intrigue around the sexuality of the show just the idea of not knowing which way the lead character would go straight or bisexual quite an interesting character and fun concept for lead character'.

At this stage Ben has not revealed his heterosexuality, but through these opening comments he is making it clear he did believe in liberal notions of alternative sexual identities. However, Ben's contributions to the group continued to perpetuate a liberal approach to sexuality and gender throughout the session, seen through his comments at different moments of the session:

Ben: 'it was interesting to see bisexuality displayed from a different way to the norm – there was nothing developed in enough depth to make me think about sexuality properly'.

Ben: 'I think it was very different between the two alien characters and the two human characters because the humans were very passive not macho and the two alien guys were very macho full of bravado very cold and calculating really'.

Here we can see that Ben in the first quote foregrounds what he interprets as the text's ability to move through the sexual spectrum but pays attention to its lack of depth. In doing so he demonstrates that he is at ease talking about issues of sexuality but also displays an understanding of emotional issues. In the second excerpt, he positions himself as critical of the idea of machismo. First, by connecting it to bravado, a word with relatively positive connotations but second then by finishing the sentence with the idea that this is 'cold and calculating' semantically consigning the idea of 'macho' to a negative ideology. Thinking about Ben's articulation and performance of gender in relation to wider discourses of gender and sexuality then, we can say that Ben is to some extent resisting the pressures of dominant hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. At the level of the conversation, he defends against these discourses by often bringing the group talk back to a focus on the importance of fluid representations of sexuality, but also by questioning the representation of masculinity in the text. In this way, he is performing a version of masculinity and sexuality in the group which some men would not feel comfortable with; a revelation of emotional insight and an ability to question heterosexuality and its dominance as an ideology despite defining himself as a heterosexual. Richardson reminds us that 'far from being a natural expression of gender and sexuality, heterosexuality is always in the process of being produced' (1996: 5). In this way, it highlights what Thomas calls the problems of analysing against a 'mainstream', in this case the idea of 'heterosexual masculinity', as these constructs are never homogenous and are lived out in different subjectivities (2002).

Ben's foregrounding of an identity which challenged many of the usual notions of 'white straight men' continued throughout the focus group. At one point when asked

whether the text defined sexuality, Ben led the discussion and seemed to place value on the fluidity of sexuality in the text:

Ben: 'I think it really did ebb and flow through, from heterosexuality to homosexual and back, it was interwoven all the way through I thought'.

We can say here that Ben, as a man, is at least not protecting hegemonic dominant forms of masculinity and sexuality which help to reproduce and maintain men's position economically and institutionally. In the wider sense, this adds validity to arguments about the possibilities of identity in terms of agency and political change. Liberatory discourses (and liberal media texts), can open up spaces for heterosexual men to express and perform what might be seen as subversive elements of gender and sexuality, in terms of what is acceptable in relation to dominant masculine hegemony. Furthermore, even if we interpret Ben's assertions as subject to the local queer liberal discourse, we can say that while heterosexuality can be seen to define homosexuality as the 'other', in this case heterosexuality can be seen to be defined by its others. In other words, Ben's notion of a heterosexual identity seems to be positioned within a wider nexus of the sexual spectrum, rather than as the default sexuality by which others are differentiated. Ben's challenge to heteronormative discourses can be seen again in his closing comments in the research session, which I now want to explore, but I want to think about these comments in a different mode of analysis; in relation to an awareness of gendered sexuality as a performance, rather than in relation to the qualities of that performance.

### **Gender awareness**

Towards the end of the research session Ben makes a final bid to deconstruct heterosexuality and also the discourse of sexual labelling:

Ben: '...I certainly wouldn't want to be portrayed as a boring straight person, they're the boring people (*he points*)- it's not particularly nice to be labelled as having no curiosity or depth or interest about yourself so it's nice to be fluid and not labelled'.

Ben vehemently rejects the label of 'straightness' here. In other words, while he might lead a 'straight' sex life he doesn't want to be 'seen' as straight. In this way, Ben acknowledges that sexual identity is something other people will measure and you can be 'portrayed' by that. This suggests two things: first, that the notion of sexuality as performance is an idea outside academic boundaries<sup>45</sup> at least for this respondent. Secondly, it foregrounds that there can be an awareness of the performance of gendered sexuality and how it is perceived by others. Austin, in his work on *Basic Instinct*, noted a similar consciousness of wanting to be 'seen' to see a film due to its explicit reputation; in that sense to make film viewing part of a performance of sexual identity, albeit a young adult one (1999). As Austin notes, 'the consumption of sexualised images of women not only produces private pleasures, but is also part of an attempted public articulation of an 'adult' heterosexual male identity'(154). Ben in a similar way wants to be associated with the text in order to avoid being a 'boring straight person'. He is performing a particular form of gendered sexual identity, in a relatively self-conscious way.

This in part speaks to a debate that has emerged since the publication of Butler's (1990) '*Gender Trouble*' about the nature of her use of the term performance. In her book, she highlights the way we are caught in performances of gender that are separate to the biology of the sexed body. Butler acknowledges in a later interview that her example of drag as part of gender performance became a 'paradigm for performativity' (Osborne, 1996:111) perhaps misleading people about her intended meaning around performance. In the same interview Butler then differentiates between performance and performativity, suggesting that the latter should be seen 'through the more limited notion of re-signification' (111). By that she seems to be suggesting that gender performances are in some ways taken from a set of what I would call 'performative figures' of gender and then re-performed, rather than as performances moulded solely by the subject. She seems to be highlighting that it is the public nature, the display of gender that we are re-performing, for the access it gives us to the heterosexual matrix, and less the theatrical performance which some have interpreted with its connotations of agency. She goes on to say that 'what's interesting is that this

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<sup>45</sup> Although this might not be the same idea. By this I mean that Ben might not be conscious of this as an academic idea, but he is reproducing the idea of our sexuality being read as a performance.

kind of voluntarist interpretation, this desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body, is obviously out there in the public sphere' (111).

To return to Ben, then, we can say that his performance here is, if only in a small way, part of the wider desire Butler talks about for a remaking of sexual and gender identity. It suggests a level of consciousness to the performance of sexuality which is operating somewhere between the overtly political (performance), and every day (re)production of sexuality (performative), and highlights the slipperiness around the idea of performance. In this way, arguably, there is a need for a more precise way to think about this space between 'performance' and the 'performative'. Indeed, Butler herself turned to another philosopher to help her better articulate the relationship between performance and performativity. She suggests that the philosopher George Herbert Mead's work on phenomenology can help us further understand the mundane way in which 'social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign' (2007: 187). There is symmetry here, between the ideas of performance vs. performativity, and debates in media studies about textual interpretation in terms of agency vs. reproduction of dominant ideas. The same issues of identification of what is a voluntary performance or 'use' of media, versus that which is a less conscious reproduction of dominant messages in the media, have been discussed in the rather dichotomised active/passive audience debate which has dominated media studies for so long. Steve Bailey (2005) in his book about identity and audiences, also uses Mead's work on the 'I/Me hermeneutic approach' to help him navigate how we can see media consumption/identity (re)formation as a process of reflection to think about the space between the consumption of messages and their use. Or, to think in Butlerian terms, the process which might mean the difference between the reproduction of 'performative' gendered sexual identity or a more purposeful 'performance' of gendered sexual identity. He uses a definition of Mead's approach to highlight what he means:

'For Mead, there are two sides to the social self. There is the objective presence of the self within the group which acts as a stimulus to others; and there is the subjective attitude of reflection which treats as an object the responses of the body to others in interaction. Mead had labelled these two

faces of the self, which are continually in dialogue, the me and the I. Both faces are social and only emerge together in discourse, but the 'me' represents a unique identity a self develops through seeing its form in the attitudes others take towards it, while the 'I' is the subjective attitude of reflection itself, which gazes on both the objective image of the self and its own responses. (38)

Ben's contribution highlights how Bailey's approach can be further applied to audience research, and can help us think about the process of interpretation and reformation of identity. Ben's quote above foregrounds that there can be a self-reflexive aspect to the way we position our identities; we are aware of the 'me' that is seen, and the 'I' reflects on that and perhaps adjusts its 'me' position in relation to it. In Ben's case, on the whole, this awareness of gendered sexual performance could be said to be an integral part of the way he challenges wider ideas of masculinity and heteronormativity. He seems to recognise both the qualities of discourses of dominant hegemonic masculinity which should be challenged, but also that they are performances and that he can, as Butler proposes, make his performances political. He becomes the social agent that Butler, Mead and Bailey all discuss. In this way, then, we can see a link between the liberal opportunities afforded by a TV text, its interpretation as such, and then for Ben the opportunity to reflect upon it and to break the cycle of performativity that exists around gender and sexuality.

I have argued so far, then, that despite the often powerful forces of discourses of masculinity and heteronormativity, texts and their interpretations can be seen to offer opportunities for alternative gendered sexual performances. By bringing together Butler's ideas of performance and Mead/Bailey's models of self-reflexivity we can open up a space for thinking about the relationships between 'performance', a self-awareness of gendered sexual identities and the 'performative', which can be seen as those 'figures' of gender that we often replicate. Indeed, I have suggested that there are links between this and the media interpretation debate. We could say, moving beyond the dichotomy of active/passive, the here we can see an aspect of meaning making, where one reflects on how we are 'seen' (in the context of what a text has suggested, so, in terms of *Torchwood* that to be fluid is interesting) and adjusts or reaffirms identity on that basis. In this case, I have explored the ways in which



gendered sexual identity can be seen to be 'performed' through opportunities in a text, showing resistance to dominant discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality.

However, to think in Butlerian terms I want to shift focus now from Ben's 'performances' of sexual gendered identity, to what she has characterised as the more 'performative' versions of gendered sexual identity. By that I mean where we can see the performative figures of gender which we replicate to be part of the 'heterosexual matrix'.

### **'Reading the romance' ...in *Torchwood*?**

Rich is a self-identified gay man from focus group two in Brighton, and offered distinctly different readings of the *Torchwood* text to the rest of his fellow participants. When asked about the representation of sexuality, Rich often steered the conversation towards its portrayal of relationships noting where there were romantic moments in the text:

Rich: 'There was a tender point when he asked that guy out on a date that was quite sweet, so in terms of asking people out on a date I related to that – no one would ask me out on an a date, and well I wouldn't ask anyone out on a date – well that did go through my mind' (*everyone laughs and Shane pats Rich on shoulder*).

Here, Rich reveals relatively early on that he enjoyed the love orientated element of the episode, and related that to his own experience and identity, partly being self-effacing which had the desired effect generating group laughter but also highlighting that he 'related to it'. In this way, Rich used the text to reiterate his own identity as a man who believes in romance. By relating to the romantic plot in the series, and then to his own identity, he also perpetuates discourses of romance; that there is an idealised man out there and it would seem Rich is waiting for him. These discourses are more often than not reproduced through Western media, film and television. As Illouz notes in her consideration of the development of discourses of love and romance, 'If during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the novel which offered to the self a narrative of love (especially to its female readers) in the twentieth century that role has been assumed (and even amplified) by the movie' (2006: 39)'.

Indeed, alongside it, but always intertwined, the media, consumer culture and the profit motive have also perpetuated the discourse of romance/love as Illouz notes, 'Consumer culture has used extensively the image of the couple in love to promote its goods (a man and a woman engaged either explicitly or implicitly in a romantic interaction is probably the most widespread image in advertising culture)' (39). The notion of romance and love as an aspiration for many of us has become a taken for granted media and consumer commodity. Indeed, the mechanics of romance and love are bound up in heterosexual institutions including in many parts of the world, Christianity and the notion of marriage; in that way, the discourse of romance and love is one that is bound up with heteronormativity. In the above excerpt Rich positions himself as at the mercy of this discourse semantically, by prioritising the idea of being asked out on a date, then by setting himself into that scene and suggesting that no one would ask him and vice versa. He literally writes himself into the story of the episode as the gay man in the room that no one asked out. It foregrounds the way our interpretations of meanings in texts are governed by powerful and pervasive heteronormative discourses such as that of romance/love. However, it is not just heteronormative discourses which are evident in a reading of identity and discourses from Rich's textual interpretations:

Rich: 'I was wondering about the quality of deepness around the relationships other than a straight one. One of them said something about how wonderful the relationship was then he said it only lasted about two weeks but they were stuck in a time loop or something, and I thought well some gay relationships are like that (*laughter in group*) the relationship has felt like forever... there was no kind of obvious heterosexual couple going on'.

Here, then, I want to return to Duggan's idea of homonormativity (2002). He posits that as well as pressures of heteronormativity upon queer women and men, there are now, following the establishment of a more predominant Western urban queer sub-culture, the pressures of homonormativity to deal with. This has also been referred to as 'queer liberalism' and is characterised by tropes such as the normalisation of aspects of the homosexual lifestyle and the reification of romantic love (and its institutions such as heterosexual marriage). In that way, it is the transposition of

heteronormative ideas of love into what have become pressures of homonormativity. I would suggest Rich reveals the influence of this discourse in his reading of the relationships in *Torchwood*. He perpetuates the performance of a 'gay' sexual identity that is subject to the power of homonormativity. It places gay men on the once heteronormative, and fast becoming homonormative, hierarchy that suggests the best type of relationship is a long-lasting emotional one. Furthermore, the corollary of this, is the perception that somehow this is less achievable for a gay man and that inevitably emotionality for a gay man in a relationship is painful and destined to failure; a cycle that is literally like being 'stuck in a time loop'. In this way, Rich is caught between the pressures of these two discourses: the heteronormative, which reifies the long term emotional relationship; and the homonormative which fuels this idea in gay culture but simultaneously suggests that it is not achievable due to the 'nature' of gay men.

The power of hetero/homonormative discourses can be seen as central to the way Rich is interpreting the text, and in that sense is part of him 'reaffirming' his 'gay' identity. However, if we look at Rich's later contributions to the group we can see that the lens of relationships and relating is a dominant part of the way he seems to decode meaning:

Rich: 'I thought it was really, well very sexually charged but also really violent too I think it was quite interesting how those things were running parallel to each other in the programme. It reminded me of relationships between people; that co-dependency people have on each other domestic violence and so on, and I can't really unpick all that in my head properly'.

Rich's reading here stands out because it was not the dominant reading by his group or myself as a textual analyst<sup>46</sup>. The rest of the group read the violence of the episode as relating to masculinity. Overall, they saw the pivoting of the violence/love binary that I discuss in chapter three as a reaction to the pressures of discourses of hegemonic traditional ideas of masculinity on portraying fluid sexuality. However, Rich I would

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<sup>46</sup> My use of dominant meaning here is not to be confused with suggesting that I am determining what the dominant intended meaning of the text was for my participants but that I am summarising what me and my participants on the whole interpreted as a dominant meaning.

argue, sees this through his experience. It is difficult to determine if this is in relation to his professional identity as a counsellor, or from his private life. Whether these influences are interpersonal, or professional, either way Rich interprets the text mainly through a lens of relating. It reminds us that identity is subject to a complex web of influences. Litosseliti and Sunderland note: "Identities can... be seen as emerging from an individual's different sorts of relationships with others and as (at least potentially) changing as their relationships change" (2002: 7). Just in the reading of Rich's interpretations we can see influences from his work and personal life but also how he reproduces dominant heteronormative and homonormative discourses. It reiterates Litosseliti and Sunderland's assertion that identity making is a two way process; we bring our own elements of identity but these have been, and are governed, by wider societal discourses (2002). In this way, we can say that meaning making from texts is at least subject to the dialectical nature of the process of identity making. Moreover, it highlights the polysemic nature of the text; if one is influenced by discourses of homonormativity and relating as seems to be the case for Rich, a very different meaning can be taken from the text to that which we saw from the previous close reading of Ben's interpretations where I argued he took opportunities from the text to 'perform' against the backdrop of discourses of heteronormativity. This is not to reduce Rich's interpretations to 'passive' readings of the text. We can still see the 'I/me' reflective process in action through Rich's comments. Rich highlights that he has reflected on the text, he has considered it in relation to himself –to the 'I'. But he also repositions that as part of the 'me', in the way he is seen, by reforming the comment into self-deprecation. He taps into the repertoire of gay sub-culture; the sub-cultural humour used historically by queers to make light of the 'queer' situation; in this case the predicament of the gay man on the path to finding a long-term relationship. He wants to be seen as another one of the many gay men in that situation. In that way, while perhaps being subject to the power of hetero/homonormative discourses, he is using performativity to draw on the camaraderie of the gay sub culture to help 'support' him. This type of performativity could then be seen as a positive element of gendered sexual performativity. Moreover, it reminds us that the dynamics of the focus group offer a different perspective on gendered sexuality that would not be available to us through a one to

one interview for example. We can see how Rich performs a version of sexual gendered identity to reach out to others in the group.

So far then I have argued that identity making can be seen to influence interpretations of texts and that texts seem to be utilised to reaffirm identities both challenging and reproducing dominant gender and sexual discourses. Also that arguably that the texts and subsequent identity (re)formation can be seen through the I/Me paradigm. Both cases highlighted that whether or not we challenge, resist, negotiate or succumb to the power of current discourses of sex and gender, identity can be seen as a process, if only terms of our abilities to reflect on our own identity making. The next participant I want to discuss, Robert, is worth considering in some detail, not least because he reveals how past identity (re)formations can influence the current reproduction of particular gendered sexual performances, and points to a questioning of some of the more excitable analyses of identity as a process in 'flux'.

### **He's here, and he's not queer**

As noted in chapter two all my focus groups took part in the relatively liberal backdrops of Brighton and London. While arguably there were members of the groups who were from poorer backgrounds or localities within the two areas, on the whole the groups were made up of liberal educated middle class participants. Most of them were either mindful of, or actively promoting, what I am calling 'queer liberal discourse'. Indeed, one reason why Robert perhaps stood out was that he initially seemed unaware or unwilling to take part in the 'queer liberal' discourse' which pervaded most of my groups. It was however a small group (four participants) which meant that he and his fellow respondents were able to express themselves perhaps more fully than in the well subscribed focus groups. A corollary of this, is that Robert was able to speak substantially without being 'talked' out by others in the meeting. Robert marked out his attitudes, and therefore by implication his sexuality, early on in the proceedings of the group:

CH: 'So in terms of your reactions to the representations in the show that you saw tonight what was your initial reactions – Robert what was your reaction?'

Robert: 'I can't say I was very comfortable, I accept that people are gay and some are not and that there are a wide range of sexualities but I don't particularly like watching homosexual acts'.

Rose: *looks down*.

Me: 'OK'.

Chris : *raises eyebrow*.

Robert attempts to situate a particular type of acceptance of queer lifestyle by differentiating between 'accepting' it and having to experience it. By highlighting that he 'tolerated' homosexual acts he was making a statement very early on about his sexuality; it very definitely wasn't 'homosexual'. This impacted on group dynamics very early on in the session. Robert in some ways was positioned as an 'outsider' by his fellow participants who all demonstrated themselves to be in favour of queer liberal discourse. Their reaction can be seen in the above excerpt through non-verbal communication such as looking down. Through this dynamic I found myself as a researcher mediating between the group members. While as a politically motivated queer academic this revelation was difficult for me to hear, I found myself taking a more neutral position or trying to navigate a path where I didn't suggest acceptance of Robert's views but that I was nevertheless interested in them. This dynamic echoed Thomas's (2002) experiences in her focus group on Inspector Morse (1987-2000) where one of her participants becomes isolated in the group by being dogmatic and unwilling to hear the views of others. Although Thomas positioned herself more 'on the side' of the women. It is possible that some of Robert's early isolation acted to reinforce his views in the sense that he felt he needed to 'defend' his position but, as will become clear, it is probably other factors in Robert's life and history which contributed to his early demarcation of his sexuality. Indeed, arguably the impact of many restrictive discourses which have shaped Robert's identity can be seen in his contributions to the groups. I want to start to consider these now, still in reference to Robert's opening comments, but thinking about how homophobic discourses can be seen to be performed.

### **Linguistic echoes of the history of gay identity**

Some of the discursive results of the development of modern 'gay' identities can be seen in Robert's comment above. There seems to be the linguistic remnants of the medicalisation of sexual acts at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Foucault (1978) highlighted still exerting their pressures upon Robert. Robert separates the idea of being 'gay' from 'homosexual' acts, in that way connoting that it would perhaps be acceptable to be 'gay' but not to exercise queer sex; a linguistic quarantining of the biology of gay sex. It could be seen as a subconscious desire to return to the pre-18<sup>th</sup> century separation of sex from social, which could be seen as beneficial in allowing for more room for alternative sexualities, if only through pretence. However, Robert's separation I would argue, needs to be seen in light of the move to 'socialise' sexuality; the subtext of his remark is that one's sexuality should be seen as separate from the social because it is difficult to manage in that sphere. Moreover, he seems to be suggesting through the use of formal 'medical/legal' language around sexuality, that one should be able to resist the desires of the body even if this seems attractive. In the same way, as perhaps, earlier conceptions of the psychologisation of sexuality imagined sexuality could be rationalised and contained. It highlights one of the fundamental paradoxes of queer politics; that to be heard, the sexual must be social, but the nature of sexual relations are that they are often private. We often see the sexual as of the body, related to our personal space and function. Indeed, arguably this view is amplified in the backdrop of the traditional 'reserved' approach to sexuality in the UK. We could say that underpinning the comment made by Robert, is one of the key fault lines or tensions that has run through queer political debate since Foucault suggested that the notion of gay identity was only a recent innovation. That sexuality is only one part of our identity and foregrounding it means that we become defined by it (1978). While it might be problematic to base our identities on one element of them, it is also nearly impossible to argue that the sexual, and therefore the homosexual is not social, and therefore is not part of our personal (I) and public (me) identities. In this way, Robert's comment at least in part, has to be seen as the reproduction of homophobic (as well as sexually repressive) discourse which still pushes for us to 'stop talking about' or 'showing' acts of gay sex.

Robert later asserts that acts of sex on TV for him are in general taboo, perhaps suggesting that it is sex more generally on TV that he finds offensive. However, as the discussion develops other contributions by Robert continue to perpetuate discourses of homophobia:

Me: 'Someone said that in another group I did that it was surprising they have any time for any sex really'.

Chris: 'You can see elements of casualty in there of course and the hospital soap – they barely have time to lift the phones to the other halves – but it's wonderful how the homoeroticism is foregrounded and any more heteronormative relationships are side lined to brief cameos and there's a sort of reversal of the norm'.

Robert: 'But can I just ask why (*to Chris*) because it's not normally done?'

Chris: 'Because it's refreshing to see'. (*looks directly at Robert defiantly*)

Robert: 'Refreshing in what sense?'

Chris: 'Because the majority of television is heterocentrist so therefore you see it from the heterosexual point of view and the gay characters are usually side-lined to one of the supporting roles the gay best friend for example in 'My Best Friend's Wedding' (*the Hollywood romantic comedy*). We're always side-lined to a supporting role unless it's a gay or lesbian film particularly in television as well I remember in 1985 when Colin (*from Eastenders*) and his barrow boy boyfriend kissed there was uproar – the whole nation was up in arms it's the end of the world so to see this on television is wonderful'.

In this way, then, Robert's contributions as the group went on could be seen as less and less about a more traditional outlook on what should and should not be 'seen' on TV in terms of sex, and more about tolerance of alternative sexuality. As a queer researcher, despite this view being problematic for me, in the focus group I was keen to understand more fully Robert's perspectives and in that way I made an effort to mediate in the group and not 'close' Robert down. As I have already argued, sexuality is closely if not inextricably linked to gender, and in many ways is governed by it. As



the discussion develops, Robert also starts to reveal his conceptions of gender and masculinity through his own contributions, and I want to consider these now and how they might be part of shaping his views on homosexuality.

### **Dividing women and men, defending masculinity**

Once the group moves into a phase of discussion regarding the portrayal of women in the series Robert prioritises the illusion of gender differences in the sexes:

Robert: 'One of the powerful images was the woman throwing the punch that was a male punch if I may put it that way the image for me is male and that's a theme which I would say has been more and more developed in cinema and film and TV'.

Chris: 'Or was she performing masculinity'.

Robert: 'Sorry?'

Chris: 'Or was she performing masculinity'.

Robert : 'Err I think that's what I was saying wasn't I?'

Chris: *Puts his hands up to suggest uncertainty.*

Robert: 'The way they are both at some level idealistically feminised but also very masculine. I find that very uncomfortable. It seems to me representing women in that way it is politically motivated in some kind of way and I think it is feminist in a way and it doesn't tie up with my experience of women are like obviously there are a huge wide range of women as there are men. I am rambling really as I find it hard to express it'.

In this exchange we can see that Robert associates the punch of a woman, to a man, and in that sense immediately conflates actions that could be said to be about gender (masculine violence) with the male body. He essentialises the activity. Chris challenges him, trying to reframe the conversation into one about the attributes of gender, Robert at this point still deflects this statement and asserts that he was correct in the first place. Robert then brings the debate into a political sphere, by highlighting

that to make women more 'masculine' as well as 'feminine' is a political endeavour. He is both 'othering' women and (re)performing the ideology of sex difference (in psychological terms) through the dichotomy of gender. I would suggest that here Robert is defending that which he sees should be the territory of men. These strategies can be seen in a wider sense as a small part of the hegemonic dominance of heterosexual masculinity which men buy into, and maintain. Robert defended men's position as senior to women, by questioning the relevance of feminism or of trying to represent women, in a way that challenges his experience of them. In this way, then, Robert has defended 'straight' male masculinity where straight men are at the top of the hegemonic ladder, followed by gay men and women, perpetuating discourses of homophobia and masculine dominance. Moreover, Robert thus far in the focus group could be seen to be performing gender in a way that defends his conceptions of masculinity. However, as an older man we can also see Robert's performances to defend masculinity in the light of changes to the 'culture of masculinity', and I want to turn now to think about how we might view his contributions in relation to this.

### **Negotiating changing discourses of masculinity and the search for certitude**

In a wider sense it could be said that Robert's anxieties about gender, sexuality and the 'feminist' motivations he believes are visible in the text, are part of what has been termed the 'crisis of masculinity'. The term, and very idea itself, has been much criticised by gender academics (Connell, 1995; Segal, 1990 and Robinson, 2000). I would agree with them in terms of its implicit suggestion that somehow men need help in this time of 'crisis', particularly when there has been so little change in terms of the economics of labour and the sexes. However, if we focus on a 'reformation' of the 'discourses of masculinity' rather than a crisis, this might seem more appropriate. In this sense we can say that some of what Robert is articulating relates to what Jackson et al (2001) found in their research. They utilised the term 'certitude' to help them frame their argument about how the men in their focus groups related to masculinity in terms of men's magazines. They quote Ulrich Beck to demonstrate how they are using the term:

‘Certitude arises from and with the prevalence of a ‘magic of feelings’ (to use a modern term), an emotional praxis that sweeps away the trembling and hesitation of questioning and doubting with the instinctive and reflex like security of becoming effective and making things effective in action.’ (1997: 65)

In this way, Jackson et al use the term to think about why both the magazines they analysed, and the men’s responses to those magazines, seem to buy into changing tropes of masculinity but could only do so in a limited or less serious way. They highlight the changing roles for men and associated masculinities seen through greater attention to health issues, increased fashion consciousness, greater role in childcare and decreased responsibility in terms of being the leading breadwinner – all part of what was sometimes referred to as the advent of the ‘new man’. They wanted to understand the discursive ambivalence to these new expectations of men shown both through group talk and through the positioning of these issues in men’s magazines. They suggest that this distancing from the reconstruction of masculinities, that are evident in magazines, is part of a desire for ‘certitude’; one that for men used to offer more certainty, which protected their interests but also offered more straightforward codes of conduct. While the outcome of this distancing might be to still maintain their senior position on the ladder of masculinity (and their position in the labour market), a search for certitude is at least part of this process. Jackson et al rather astutely note the paradoxical idea that while masculine identity has become deconstructed through the pressures mentioned above, through men’s talk it is reconstructed to help provide ‘certitude’.

This search for certitude I propose can be seen in Robert’s response when I asked the group about what they thought about the need for sexual identities:

Robert: ‘I think it has become much more difficult for men who are constitutionally heterosexual to feel confident about their heterosexuality because of the fluidity you are talking about there. Again I see this with my son I can only state it as a belief I believe my son is not gay and he has a number of psychological problems and it means he has only had brief relationships with women. He is definitely attracted to women in my view but he has come under

considerable pressure to declare himself gay and he has also been raped as well which doesn't help, that's another issue. I am not trying to bring that in the discussion. I think there is too much fluidity at least the level of social recognition. I think there is a distinction of fluidity privately, and fluidity as a recognised social thing, which we all say is ok. I think the latter is a problem for men and also perhaps women who are unsure themselves who are searching for an identity and what to feel sure about themselves which of course could be a gay or a heterosexual identity. I think that there is a particular problem with heterosexuality. It is being attacked from the gay side and from the feminist side. Men if they are not super confident are not quite sure what to do with themselves'.

As well as the methodological issues here regarding disclosure in a forum such as this which I have addressed in chapter two, this statement by Robert demonstrates the search for certitude which Jackson et al identify. He is very literally articulating the subjectivity of experiencing the pressures of changing discourses around sexuality and masculinity versus a search for one's own position within that. Arguably, we can see here a glimpse of fragmentation of identity in action as a symptom (or cause) of postmodernity<sup>47</sup> as well as part of the pluralisation of sexuality and masculinity. Robert in some ways is articulating the way the 'modern' gendered sexual 'self' still craves 'certitude' amongst the more complex set of choices in the 'postmodern'. Or put another way, while we may have a more liberal sexual and gender context in the UK, in order to situate ourselves in that cultural milieu, there is, as Ang (1996) would suggest, the 'work' of identity to be conducted. I would not argue that the 'work' of identity means that we should not question and deconstruct identity formations, particularly those that might form part of dominant hegemonic heteronormative masculinity and men's position in institutional frameworks, but it is a factor in the process of identity making. Indeed, to elaborate on this I want to focus on Robert's

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<sup>47</sup> There is still debate amongst academics as to whether modernity as a period or a moment in our history has passed. Kellner is suspicious of the use of 'postmodernity' as a concept and believes that many aspects of what constituted modernity still exist or have implications for how we live our lives today. (1995). In this way, I would argue that perhaps we are seeing a gradual shift from modernity to postmodernity rather than a sudden change; a view also held by Merl Storr (1999), Ken Plummer (1995) and Donald Morton (1996).

closing comments which throws light on the 'work' of identity making in terms of historical encounters with discourses.

### **Histories of identity making**

When asked about whether Robert saw his sexual identity as political, Robert revealed some of the background which may have contributed to the way he had formed his identity in terms of masculinity and sexuality:

Robert: 'Whether my identity as a heterosexual is political I am not sure. But of course heterosexuals are a group and that group has power and heterosexuals are a majority. I would have thought it has more power than other groups in that sense it is political but in the sense it is the subject that is political rather than the individuals in it. I am aware at this stage of my life that I could have chosen to go down the route of homosexuality I was at a boarding school where homosexuality was rife and I took part myself sometimes in homosexual acts and I can see the attraction as a choice to go down that road. I don't think I am constitutionally able and I have a son who has a kind of dilemma around that but it's too complicated to explain the whole thing ermm the position which society takes on these matters has political consequences or social consequences one should say. It will have an effect on what choices people make in their lives. In that sense it is political or socio-political it's difficult in a sense everything is political'.

Here Robert reveals some of the 'material' as well as discursive pressures that arguably have influenced his choices around sexuality. Perhaps most importantly Robert uses the formal language of being 'constitutionally' able to frame his reasons for not pursuing his gay desires. This seems to match his earlier use of the word homosexuality (a term which he again invokes here) as a formal almost clinical method of referring to his ability to cope with the process of coming out. In this way, Robert seems to be separating the rational (connoted by the formal medical/legal language) 'choices' of sexual lifestyle from the (emotional/physical) bodily desires of sexuality, a choice arguably faced by many more men of Robert's age in the UK who were developing a sexual identity in the 1970s. It is a reminder that being gay when Robert

was younger was much more taboo, and therefore despite his desires, he chose not to pursue a gay lifestyle. Through the *Torchwood* text, and group talk, we can say that at the very least Robert contextualised or revealed some of his history, which up until that point appeared to be a reaffirmation of the dominant discourses of heteronormative masculine hegemony.

This perspective challenges to a certain extent the reduction of identity making to a process or one with possibilities, a view that is becoming predominant in media and cultural studies. For example, Gauntlett in his text book aimed at undergraduates, *'Media, Gender and Identity'* (2002), includes a bullet point list summarising the queer theory position on sexual and gendered identity stating that its view of identity is that 'People can change'. While Gauntlett here does not suggest that people will change, by summarising identity theory down to this point arguably we lose some of the complications involved in this process. In relation to Robert, we are reminded that key decisions evidently influenced by what would have been more powerful discourses of homophobia in the 70s, create foundations for identity building later in life. Of course Robert's revelation here shows that through the group he has considered the circumstances of his identity making, and therefore at least is showing a possible change in his identity. In that way, if we want to be more precise than saying 'people can change', we could say that for Robert, identity is a process with possibilities but one that is bound up in the history of the process of that identity making. Indeed, I want to turn now to another member of the same focus group to further explore how our personal histories are bound up in our identity making.

### **Contextualising experience through the *Torchwood* text**

Julie, another member of Brighton group one, from early on in the proceedings includes herself as part of the queer liberal discourses that I have suggested dominated the majority of the research sessions. She noted early on in the group that she valued the portrayal of sexuality in *Torchwood*:

Julie: 'I thought it was quite refreshing to see that portrayal of sexuality and identity it just felt it was a bit contrary to the norm to how it is often portrayed in the media, it just felt as if it was a good angle it was just refreshing or

something different it felt as if it moved away from this thing of heteronormativity.'

Julie continues later in the session to make it clear that it is not just the open portrayal of alternative sexuality that she approves of, but more generally the approach to the depiction of sexuality, when I asked her specifically what she liked about it:

Julie: 'When I saw it in movie or the programme – I suppose a playfulness or a fluidity or a multifacetedness, it felt as if it shifted, it appeared well from what I observed, that there was sexual tension between him (jack) and more than one of the characters, just interesting.'

In the same way as Robert's comments could be read as homophobic, initially Julie's comments could be read as part of a desire to include herself in the dominant queer liberal discourse about positive representation of sexuality on television that pervaded all the groups. However, later in the group when discussing identity politics Julie reveals something of the development of her sexual identity:

Julie: 'Yes I am south African and when I lived there it was so hard to be in a same sex relationship, it was frowned upon and questioned. And in the UK and in Brighton in the last 10 years it's just so refreshing to have the space, it is ok that you are not the same type, you aren't asked to account for why you want a particular kind of relation or why you relate to people the way you do.'

She goes on to highlight that in addition to valuing the more liberal approach to homosexuality in the UK, she would also approve of an even more open ended attitude around sexuality:

Julie: 'Yes and not having to name it or define it or pin it down that's really helpful in society, it feels like people have the need to use labels or define our sexuality in a particular way there is a tension between forming your identity as a girl or having to confirm to a norm.'

In this way, then, we can see that Julie's experience of homophobic discourse in South Africa, has shaped her views in relation to sexual identity politics in the UK and in that sense is part of her positive reading of *Torchwood's* depiction of fluid sexuality. Whilst

her current identity as a an out gay women in Brighton can be seen as part of her interpretation of *Torchwood*, we can also say that the comparison she makes between her past identity as gay woman in South Africa and this country, makes liberal sexual identity politics even more important to her. As Mclean (2005) notes 'the meaning of past experiences are lifelong processes and there are different points in the life span when identity work and meaning making are heightened' (683). While identity making is in process there are times when this might be more significant in relation to the pressure of discourses encountered at the time or point in someone's lifespan. In this way, while we can say that Robert and Julie's identity and meaning making now are in flux they are still part of the process of identity making in the past.

This tension in identity as a process, but one that is made up also of our experiences, can be seen almost literally in comments Julie makes later about her identification with Captain Jack Harkness and how she relates that to her own life:

Grp1- Julie – 'yes in some ways it reminded me of a time in my life and the playfulness of the lead character and the way he related to people – the multiple layers of relationships and things going on and in that sense I think I could relate to it...'

CH: 'In that sense it was a good experience it was a positive experience'.

Julie - 'yes but also for me observing that and realising that I have kind of moved on from there'.

In this way, Julie firstly highlights the way she invested herself in the narrative – she identified with the lead character (Captain Jack) evidently associating herself with his multiplication of sexual relations. When probed about this identification Julie notes that she moved from an observing point of view with the text, into a reflective place literally describing some of the meaning making and identity formation process (or at least conceptualising it in language as a linear process as arguably it might not be linear at all as Corner [1998] notes). In doing so, Julie highlights that identity making is a process in flux in terms of her 'realisation' that her identity no longer matches so



closely to Captain Jack's. However, she adjusts her perception of her identity. To think in Bailey's terms, she again reforms that identity by reflecting on the 'me' of herself and realising it is now the 'I' of her identity. In doing so she also throws into sharp focus the reality of our identities; that they are at least partly made up of, or reformed from experiences and previous vestiges of identity.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have addressed the links between meaning making, textual interpretation and its relation to performances of gendered sexual identity. I brought together recent gender theory (Butler), perspectives on meaning making in terms of self-reflection (Bailey/Mead), and identity theory, to focus on a part of the interpretation process where textual meaning making is used in identity (re)formation. Ben's case highlighted his conscious performance of a gendered sexual identity that he seems to be aware is 'seen'. In that way it is perhaps foregrounding Butler's vision for what can be defined in a small way a subversive performance of gender against the grain of dominant discourses of masculine hegemony. This could be contrasted with Rich's performative nature, which reiterated hetero/homonormativity through discourses of romance and in that way sustained Butler's heterosexual matrix. However, Rich also used humour and camaraderie in the group to reach out for support from the other queer male members of the group, and in that sense while performative, this version of sexual gendered identity is still useful to Rich. It highlights the complex nature of the terms of performance and performativity, in terms of their utilisation in the politics of gendered sexual identity, and that there is still room to think more carefully about the space between these two ideas.

In terms of meaning making, I have suggested that there is symmetry in the performance and performativity and the active/passive debates in terms of agency. I noted that both Bailey and Butler turned to the philosopher Mead to help them with some of the difficulties of thinking through the space between consumption of messages and acting upon them. By following Bailey and using Mead's hermeneutic approach I was able to show how my participants all in the end reflected on the 'I' through the way their 'me' was seen, either in the group as in Robert's case towards

the end of the session, or in terms of the way they relayed their idea of their public 'me' as was the case for Ben in terms of his desire to not be 'seen' as the 'straight' one. Through his use of the 'I/Me' paradigm Bailey highlights that postmodern thought around identity has tended to 'flatten' the subject highlighting fluidity over depth. I would argue this approach reveals the complicated nature of media consumption and its relations with identity making. In this way, we are perhaps not being sophisticated enough in our approach to the how and why of identity, which in a political sense is also to a certain extent the how and why of gendered and sexual agency.

There is a considerable body of academic writing on identity which, while it considers its multifaceted complexity, often reduces it in the end to a notion that it is a continual process. I have argued that while my participants have shown how they both reaffirm and reform their identities, they have also revealed how these are contextualised within older parts of their experience and identity. In particular with Robert due to his slightly 'uncomfortable' presence in the group and his group's smaller size, I have been able to analyse at length the way he performed his gendered sexual identity. He resisted the predominant queer liberal discourse in the group and at a wider level he supported discourses of heteronormative masculinity. However, as became clear through later contributions, much of Robert's sexual gendered identity seems to have been constructed through experiences at school. He made 'choices' which he highlights were at least partly about the expected 'outcomes', should he have made different choices in relation to sexual (and therefore gender) identity. In this way, oppressive discourses of homophobia from the past were part of Robert's search for 'certitude', and at the time they were too great for him to resist. In this way, then, at the same time as adding to the now considerable weight of argument from media scholars that identity is a continual process, I want to suggest that all the cases considered so far, and in particular Robert and Julie's, also problematise the notion that identity is in flux. That as seen in this chapter and indeed in chapter 3, despite cultural aspirations for change in terms of sexual fluidity or masculinity, there is a need for 'certitude', a more stable project of identity, also evident in my participant's responses.

While in some ways this suggests that identity is more difficult to transform than we would like to believe, the challenge made by Chris to Robert's identity also highlights the way that certitude for gay/queer men gives them a voice. In this case, it is a voice which in the end sponsored Robert to open up about his identity and start to question it. In this way, we can see how the micro politics of a focus group can highlight the tensions between the need for more stable identities, and a radicalisation of identity politics. In terms of wider thinking about identity and its political role then, I would suggest the cases here highlight the need to hold on to both the vision for the possibilities of fluid identities but also an acceptance of differing social/political and emotional needs. It reminds us that identity is a wide ranging concept; changes in sexual identity impact upon our identities as emotional and psychological individuals. It is a complex debate which can't be completely addressed by this research, but at the very least it seems to suggest that we should be mindful of the need for 'certitude' while asking radical critical questions about gendered sexuality.

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter I want to return to the overall aim of my thesis, which was to consider the potential of representation of fluid sexuality in *Torchwood* through my own textual analysis and audience interpretations. The topic of the depiction of fluid sexuality drove chapter three of this thesis, but I want to think more broadly about this now considering my arguments in the subsequent chapters. In the bigger picture, what can we say about *Torchwood*'s position in the canon of British queer TV? Given my audience's responses and my considerations of the subject in relation also to gender and genre, in the end how liberatory are the representations in *Torchwood*? What is being represented in *Torchwood*: is it homosexuality, bisexuality or fluid sexuality? If this is fluid sexuality what is *Torchwood*'s role in moving the representation of sexuality forward? How does the latest series of *Torchwood* (season 4) impact on my audience research which took place before this season was aired? How can the audience talk around fluid representations and sexuality help us think about wider debates in queer theory about the need for identity politics vs. fluid sexuality? What conclusions can be drawn from this research and what further questions does it raise for future consideration?

Overall, I argue that in some ways *Torchwood* is a 'new flame' in terms of offering TV representation of plural sexualities. However, I want to propose that while in some ways the series rejects ideas of heteronormativity, if we tease apart what we define as heteronormative, then I want to argue particularly in relation to gender and the sexed body, it still conforms to these ideas. Moreover, in considering wider questions of queer politics given my analysis of the series, I argue that my research and the series is a reminder that in terms of academic political analysis, and in particular queer theory, we need to foreground the link between sex and gender. I also want to suggest that when we bring together an analysis of the politics of representation with the politics of norms we are able to see linkages in currently dichotomised debates around identity politics. In doing so, I suggest that it points to a need perhaps for a more fluid approach to identity itself as well as sexuality. I begin to conclude my thesis, back at

my starting point for this research: to what extent can we say that *Torchwood* is a liberatory text in relation to gendered sexuality?

***Torchwood*: A new flame for UK TV sexual representation?**

Russell T. Davies intentions for *Torchwood*, if we believe the media reports, were that in terms of sexuality he wanted to 'mix it up'. My starting point for this thesis was considering through audience research to what extent he achieved this goal in terms of sexual representation, at least in the series which have aired up until now (three seasons until the audience research and one further season before the project was completed). In terms of sexual representation the series has been welcomed by many scholars. Barron (2011) in his consideration of *Torchwood* as a series suggests that it signified a new moment in UK TV history in terms of sexual representation through its rejection of heteronormative tropes. Indeed, as I suggested in chapter my own textual analysis and my audience's interpretations of the episode screened suggest that it offered liberation on several fronts. For example in my pilot group, to my surprise the majority of the respondents approved of the discourse of sex outside of traditional relationships that the episode screened and the first two seasons foregrounded. Most respondents in all the focus groups approved of the series' depiction of plural sexuality without labels, a representation which was particularly prevalent in the episode aired but also right through season one and two. In this way, we can say that a number of elements of heteronormativity such as the drive to be 'in an emotional/sexual relationship', and the representation of fixed sexual identities (which arguably is driven by partly by heteronormativity) are challenged by the series. However, when we consider my research as a whole, I would argue that the series still has elements of heteronormativity in two ways: firstly, in its changing generic make up over the four seasons where increasingly family orientated tropes and fixed sexual identities were invoked, and secondly through connotations of gender and sexed body binarism, seen both in my own textual analysis and in the interpretations of my respondents. Moreover, I would suggest that there are also connotations of homonormativity in the text. By this, I mean, the norms and pressures that have risen as part of the queer community's new confidence; a queer version of heteronormativity. This is seen

through the inclusion of Captain Jack and John in the episode screened, with their military outfits and hyper-masculine traits suggestive of a more familiar contemporary gay male identity. Also through the inclusion of John Barrowman as the male lead in the series who is a publically gay actor. I want to take each of these areas in turn to consider their significance and relations with wider debates in terms of queer media and cultural studies.

### **Boldy going where no (British) science fiction (TV) has gone before**

The *Torchwood* text is one where science fiction meets soap meets crime serial meets hospital drama. It is a reminder that we should not be reductive in our classification of TV in relation to genre, which is increasingly multifarious. Indeed, as I suggested in chapter five, *Torchwood* splices science fiction motifs with the everyday. The 'rift', aliens and advanced technologies exist alongside everyday mise-en-scène, sweeping Cardiff cityscapes, the interweaving of the local police into storylines and the domestic elements of the narrative such as Gwen's relationship with Rhys. This enables the text to include radical ideas of fluid or bisexuality which even in a more diluted form by the fourth season, become very pronounced storylines about overt homosexuality, still not a regular trope for British TV. Indeed if we put this into the context of the history of British UK television science fiction and drama, I would argue it is this blending that has enabled *Torchwood* to include radical depictions of sexuality and still develop from a series that began life in a niche position on BB3 to a primetime and then international series on BBC1. To highlight this I want to think more broadly now about the history of the representation of fluid and/or bisexuality.

I return to two series I mentioned in the introduction of this project, *Metrosexuality* (1999) and *Hollyoaks in the City* (2006), which attempted to depict bisexuality or fluid sexuality previously and started life on less mainstream channels<sup>48</sup> (Channel 4 and E4 respectively). *Metrosexuality*, a series which aired for one season, can in some ways be seen as a precursor to *Torchwood* in its narrative which represented the lives of a racially and sexually diverse set of friends and acquaintances in Notting Hill. While

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<sup>48</sup> By less mainstream I mean that Channel Four has always championed alternative shows and E4 is a niche digital channel targeting the younger audience.

there were references to sexuality, bisexuality was included in the narrative and there was a resistance to using terms such as lesbian, gay and bisexual. The sexual plurality of the cast was foregrounded through action in the narrative rather than dialogue. Indeed, later *Hollyoaks in the City*, a spin-off from Channel Four's soap *Hollyoaks* (1995-), arguably tried to propel itself to success by making depictions of explicit sex, sexuality and plural sexuality one of the features that differentiated it from *Hollyoaks* (1995-) by positioning it as the adult version. *Hollyoaks in the City* therefore had a similar relationship to *Hollyoaks* that *Torchwood* has to *Doctor Who*, in terms of the way the BBC, and subsequently the media, positioned *Torchwood* as 'Adult *Doctor Who*'. *Metrosexuality* played with surrealism through the use of bright coloured mise-en-scène, and animated visual effects, and in that way suggested a 'hyper-real' element to the series. *Hollyoaks in the City* is arguably the more conventional of the two, but it still flagged its intentions to be racy and 'adult' by including images of women in fetish clothes, and series characters performing in strip clubs, denoting the series was about the 'sexual'. In that way both series have commonalities with *Torchwood* in their attempt to depict a more inclusive view of sexuality but also to 'flag' up the adult or utopian nature of the series with visual effects or sexual cues. However, unlike *Torchwood* both series only lasted one season and in that sense must be seen as less successful than *Torchwood*. I would suggest it was the unique fusion of science fiction tropes with other genres, including links to *Doctor Who*, which gave *Torchwood* permission to present some radical representations of sexuality and still be more successful than some of its predecessors.

In relation to genre, this is made all the more impressive by the track record of British TV science fiction in relation to sexuality. If we consider the history of adult UK science fiction TV, and some of its key texts including *Day of the Triffids* (1981), *Chimera* (1991), *Red Dwarf* (1988-1999, 2009) *Sapphire and Steel* (1979-1982), *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes*; none attempted to address the issues of sexuality never mind "alternative" sexuality, despite often gritty dystopian or eccentric takes on science fiction themes. Moreover, this does not necessarily match the depiction of sexuality in literary science fiction, where there has been a much greater tendency to depict fluid or alternative sexualities and genders. Examples as early as 1969 include Ursula Le Guin's *The Left*

*Hand of Darkness*, and John Varley's *Eight Worlds* series, starting with its first short story in 1976. In both these imaginings, people are able to change their sexes and in John Varley's stories most characters are bisexual. In TV however, science fiction has been less adventurous about sexuality until *Torchwood*. Arguably without the blending of science fiction and more everyday genre, *Torchwood* would not be as radical; with a harder science fiction edge fluid sexuality would still be positioned as a futuristic/alien idea particularly with British Science Fiction's edgy themes. And yet science fiction and alternative sexuality, is not an area which is even well established in British TV, which highlights that it is only through dialectical genre development that this new hybrid form of series is able to break the norms of science fiction, as well as queer TV representation more widely. Indeed, to be quite specific, it is not just impressive in the sense that it is representation of homosexuality in science fiction, but it is the representation of two forms of sexuality which have rarely been on our TV screens. Firstly, bisexuality which is mostly missing from our screens, and when bisexuals do appear they are usually depicted as indecisive, mad or 'bad'. While we might argue that there are problems with the bisexuality in *Torchwood*, the exclusion of human female to human female bisexuality being one, we can say that it is one of the most direct and wide ranging attempts to represent bisexuality yet. The second form, seen in my own analysis and my participants' responses, places the depiction of sexuality in *Torchwood*, at least in season one and two, into a different sphere of representation, in that it did not rely on labelling and in that sense is representation of 'fluid' sexuality. In some ways this addresses one of the issues of the label of bisexuality itself, which suggests that a person embodies a dualism, to be bi is to suggest that one wants 'two' things or can go 'either way'. However, bisexuality might be more appropriately seen (although this is not to challenge those who identify as bisexual, more a theoretical point) as multisexual or fluidly sexual as one might only want sex on occasions in a same sex situation or vice versa. In this way, and quite specifically, we can say that in genre terms, and in terms of form of sexuality, *Torchwood* is a 'new' flame for representation both in terms of science fiction but also more widely in British TV drama.



It is perhaps testimony to the absence of "alternative" sexuality in British science fiction TV, that *Torchwood's* generic make up in the end bowed to this historical pressure and changed as it transitioned into mainstream TV. The limitations of what the production team, and the BBC believe the British audience can bear, seem to be revealed by the watering down of sexuality that occurred after series three. Indeed, this development does beg the question why alternative sexuality has taken this long to become part of TV science fiction, when it started to emerge in literature such a long time ago. Moreover, the wider area of sexuality and science fiction or cult TV is an area that seems under researched; given my analysis here this would certainly seem to be a topic ripe for further study in the future. The watering down of radical sexual representation in the series as it became more mainstream is one reason, I have suggested, that we cannot say the show simply challenges heteronormativity. However, as I have argued in chapters three and four there are pervasive elements of gender and sexed body binarism in the series, and in the next section I want to suggest that viewing the series from the perspective of gender and the sexed body reveals elements of hetero and homo normativity.

### **The gender parallax**

If we say then that Russell T Davies and the *Torchwood* production team altered the landscape of TV sexual representation, this seems less so when we view the series from the perspective of gender. While Davies disrupted sexuality in the first two seasons and as we have seen the episode screened for this research, as I suggested in chapters three and four, heteronormative and homonormative gender and sexed body binaries are still evident in mine and my participants' readings of the text. Despite the mixing of genres and sexualities, hidden in the text of *Torchwood* as seen in chapter three and four are the monsters of the heteronormative gender binary. Paradoxically the monstrous pair of Captains Jack/John in the episode analysed, disrupt the hetero/homo binary with their multisexuality but simultaneously also fetishise and reiterate gender differences; another more fundamental binary. This double act, literally has a double action ideologically in the text. In this way, they both liberate us from, and reproduce problematic heteronormative cultural norms. This is made all the

more significant if we think about the relationship between bisexuality and gender. As Callis (2012) notes in her insightful piece on the elision of bisexuality in queer theory, Butler is famous for highlighting the importance of gender as part of sexuality, but she does not interrogate bisexuality's role in this to any significant degree. Callis notes that bisexuality disrupts gender in that it is even more difficult to 'fix' a gender category to a bisexual person. While often queer men are aligned to 'feminine' gender aspects and gay women are seen as 'masculine', the bisexual is not as easy to frame in this way. However, when we apply this thinking to *Torchwood* this doesn't seem to 'fit', where as I have already argued the women are mostly side-lined and the leading multi-sexual men are made hyper-masculine. Of course, in genre terms, science fiction and action TV needs its heroes, and hyper-masculinity is one way of delivering that trope. But its inclusion inevitably effects the way sexuality in the series is understood. The portrayal of fluid sexuality while radical, as I have argued in chapter five, was short lived and as I suggested in chapter four, was in many ways rendered 'gimmicky' by the sub-textual presence of the mirage of the gender binary. The dominance of tropes of hyper-masculinity meant that many of my respondents could not take the fluid sexuality seriously. The pressures of homonormativity (desire to be masculine like straight men) and heteronormativity (in this case the desire to reproduce the norms of heterosexuality) pushed depictions of masculinity to one extreme; one which is often associated with gay masculinity making Captains Jack and John seem more gay than fluid. In this way, all at once the text was both hetero and homonormative.

It would be easy at this point to create another binary in terms of the two terms homo and hetero normativity. However, there are relations between hetero and homonormativity. Homonormativity in gender terms often mimics heteronormativity, and in particular here I mean the drive to be established on the ladder of masculinity, where queer men aspire to be as high on this ladder as straight men (are perceived to be). What makes homonormativity separate, and potentially a more difficult discourse to analyse and criticise, is its relation to the queer community, which is still oppressed in parts. It is complex, for as I noted in chapter six of the project, homonormativity often offers community. I highlighted the discourse of the search for a long-lasting emotional relationship, a heteronormative trope (long term emotional/sexual

relationship) converted into a homonormative discourse, but with the pervasive belief by many that it can never truly succeed. A suggestion that circulates in the queer community, but in the end has at its roots, a tacit acknowledgement that queers find it less easy to be part of the biology of the sexes and therefore can never quite be heteronormative. However, this partly self-inflicted conundrum, was also positioned in one of my focus groups as part of camaraderie for queer men. In this way, then, homonormativity and heteronormativity, as in Sedgwick's (1990) conception of the homo/hetero binary, are inextricably linked. While heteronormativity can be restrictive, I would suggest homonormativity needs to be further considered in media and cultural studies for it has within its boundaries many of the pressures of heteronormativity, but also the allure of community and often the pretence of queer politics.

This absence of gender deconstruction (at least in the episode subject to close scrutiny) that is revealed through heteronormativity and homonormativity, is one which exists in the reproduction of everyday culture. Indeed even in trying to pinpoint the relationship between gender, heteronormativity and homonormativity, I find myself struggling to keep the picture in my mind, perhaps testimony to how bound up and difficult to unpick gender is in the circuit of culture. So to be clear, I mean heteronormativity in the episode screened, seen through the dominance of masculinity; and homonormativity seen through the way the episode includes hyper-masculinity and motifs of the gay sub-culture. In this way, it can be said there was only partial disruption of the foundations of the representation of gendered sexuality that maintain false binaries such as homo/hetero and masculinity/femininity. As I have suggested against the backdrop of Captain Jack's laddishness and in generic terms the continual 'playful' references to other films/genres, the fluid sexuality of the first two seasons while refreshing was also often pitched (and read) as 'gimmicky'; in particular as some of my respondents noted with comments regarding sex with poodles. It was interpreted by some of my participants as 'cosmetic'. In this way, a deeper deconstruction which played more with gender dynamics, which I would suggest are still more taboo and more pervasive than sexuality, might have projected a 'deeper' commitment to a radical gendered sexual identity politics. Without it, once the series

moved into the mainstream slot as I have argued in chapter five, it had to lose its playful element and its sexual content to a certain extent, in order to develop a broader appeal and become a 'serious' drama. Fluid sexuality was seen as one of the playful elements of the series that could be disposed of, which would have been more difficult to do had more fundamental gender dynamics been addressed. A toning down of the hyper masculinity of Jack for example. To a certain extent Russell T. Davies and the BBC/Starz production teams ostensibly tried to address representation of gender and the sexes in the fourth, and latest season of the series, which aired after my focus groups had taken place. In the next part of this discussion, I want to consider how its representation of gender and sexuality might be seen in relation to my arguments around a subtextual heteronormativity in the episode screened.

### **A 'monster' of heterosexual biology**

In the fourth and most recent series of *Torchwood*, Russell T. Davies and the Starz/BBC production team addressed the poor representation of women that my participants and I identified in the earlier series. Despite an even further retreat into sexual identity politics with a new male lead Rex, a homophobic ostensibly straight male, who refers to Jack and numerous other characters in the show as 'gay', the production team give Gwen a much greater role in the series. Indeed she, in many ways, becomes the warrior of the season, defending her family and being single-handedly responsible for the large-scale incendiary destruction of a warehouse. However, despite addressing the poor representation of women in the series, I want to suggest the subtext of heteronormativity of the show was finally revealed at the end of this season of the series. The team had been taken away from Cardiff (and the rift) and installed in the U.S. alongside FBI agents. A new 'monster' was driving the narrative, one which was responsible for causing the suspension of death in all adults, except Captain Jack, who now became mortal. For most of the fourth series we are left unsure exactly what is causing the phenomenon which began on 'miracle day' the overarching subtitle of the season. The unknown cause of the phenomenon we eventually determine is under the earth. The climax of the season sees the revelation

of the phenomenon causing the suspension of death as a creature or entity called 'The Blessing' which is living in the Earth and runs right through it.



Source: [http://spacegypsies.com/media/2011/12/torchwood\\_blessing.jpg](http://spacegypsies.com/media/2011/12/torchwood_blessing.jpg)

As the still above taken from the series shows the opening of the entity is a large bloody hole, which while not visually matching female genitalia certainly evokes that idea. The religious connotations of the name given to the entity, 'The Blessing', and the relationship to its resemblance to the opening of the vagina seems hard to ignore. A linguistic denotation binding imagery of female biology to religious status. At the end of the last episode of the season Jack has to bleed himself to death into the hole in order to stop the people of Earth dying, and in that way be 'sucked' into it. It is also hard not to notice the symbolism of this storyline. As if the sub-textual heteronormative element of the show, that seems evident in the episode screened for this research, is being revealed through the domination of female genitalia. Of course invoking the idea of female genitalia does not have to be seen as heteronormative, in the sense that gay women still have sex and children, however, female genitalia is still closely associated with childbirth and that process is one that is still widely viewed in cultural terms as relating to heterosexual sex. There is a moment where we can say that Jack is made small to this symbol of women and in that way the multisexual 'lad' is dominated by a sign of female sex. In the end, though, Jack's blood defeats 'The Blessing' and some of the lost sexual radicalism is regained in a plot twist that sees

Jack's homophobic sidekick take some of Jack's blood, and become immortal. By implication there is a suggestion that he may have taken on some of Jack's other identity traits to his horror. While this turns the character's homophobia around and squarely directs it back at him, it seems problematic that the story is reproduced through the discourse of blood with its inevitable undertones of HIV transmission. Indeed, as Du Plessis (1996) suggests, the discourse of HIV/AIDS particularly at the beginning of the epidemic was a major contributor to prejudice against bi or fluid sexual people as they were accused of bringing HIV to the lesbian and heterosexual communities. In this way, some of the representations of sexuality in the final season are less radical than they had been in the past. However, with the series finale, and indeed closing moments of the last episode depicting an entity that very much resembles and signifies heterosexual biology, it seems that the heteronormative subtext that, I and many of my respondents highlighted, is further revealed.

In this way, then, gender and the sexed body is behind both the discourse of heteronormativity and homonormativity which I have argued through my research has run pervasively right through *Torchwood*. I want to suggest that this is partly because the structuring nature of gender (and the sexes) is still pervasive in society and popular culture as seen here. But I also want to suggest that academically the relations between sexuality and gender, despite a rise in serious theory in this area, are still often deprioritised. This is not to read off the text and suggest that my research can be used to make a wide ranging claim about gender, however it is to start to ask a question prompted by my reading of gender here, whether academically we still have not accepted gender's structuring role in sexuality. This is a step that is important if we are to deploy effective critical strategies towards popular cultural texts such as *Torchwood*, where gender's role in sexual representation is even more pervasive.

### **Towards gender as a solid, not a dotted line**

The ability of gender norms to remain implicit is one which is evident even in wider theoretical considerations of sexuality. In Barron's analysis of *Torchwood* he suggests that it is breaking with heteronormative ideas of sexuality. I have noted so far that there are areas where the series can still be seen as heteronormative in relation to its

depiction of sexuality. To this I would add that part of heteronormativity is the reproduction of gender and sexed body roles – the reproduction of the heterosexual matrix through gendered sexual bodies. As I have already suggested *Torchwood* in many ways reproduces many of these stereotypes, through its reification of hyper-masculinity and the absence of leading females in most of the series. Other academics thinking about bisexuality and fluid sexuality have also noted the absence of gender in theory of sexuality. For Du Plessis (1996) gender is a ‘missing link’ which is elided in some queer theory. Queer theory by the nature of its inception is rooted in sexuality, and although one of its most significant contributors, Butler, has offered considerable thinking about the inextricable link between gender and sexuality, queer theory has often forgotten trans/bi/fluid sexual identities, which as I have argued ‘complicate’ gender. Du Plessis cites a number of examples of queer conferences where mention of trans communities in the titles for the conference was rejected. Perhaps this is because of queer theory’s origins in attempts to radicalise what was becoming an increasingly conservative feminist, and gay identity politics, and in that sense it came from sexual theory and politics. To accept fluidity of gender and the sexed body is still a fundamental taboo<sup>49</sup>, but one which is part of the foundations of cultural norms around sexuality; the gender (and sex) binary is the cultural ghost that lends itself to dichotomised sexuality. Indeed this cultural ‘machine’ of gendered sexuality is rather accurately summarised by Fuss (1991). She asks, ‘and what gets left out of the inside/outside, heterosexual/homosexual opposition, an opposition which could plausibly be said to secure its seemingly inviolable dialectical structure only by assimilating and intertwining other sexualities (bisexuality, transvestism, transexualism) to its own polar logic?’(2). In this way, Fuss is noting that these groups because of their ‘inbetweenness’, get left outside this binary. However, as Du Plessis notes Fuss then goes on to almost completely leave these groups out of her own analysis. Indeed, what is interesting is even in the quote, gender is implied, it is not overt. Fuss talks about the heterosexual/homosexual opposition but does not mention gender, which is

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<sup>49</sup> There is change, but this is still in the main in the realm of the pornographic/sexual world where transgender/transsexual is becoming more prominent. However in everyday culture and in terms of televisual representation for example, transgender and transsexual people are gaining more presence but they are still usually represented as ‘novelties’.

an implicit part of this. It is one of the commonalities or relations that joins all these groups together. Whether we are gay, straight, fluid, transvestite, transsexual or queer we are all part of the cultural reproduction of ideas of gender and the sexed body. In this sense, I want to suggest that in the same way that from my own research, it seems that the sexual fluidity of *Torchwood* can't escape this gender and sexed body dichotomy, nor can academic thinking, and in that sense gender needs to be seen as part of sexuality in our analyses. I have attempted in this thesis to always think of gendered sexual identities and representations, and while there is undoubtedly slippage in my thinking at times, in these subjects perhaps linking these two realms as much as possible will be one way to ensure that we notice the binarism of gender and the sexed body in deconstruction of sexuality. In this way, it is something that perhaps we need to consider more widely in queer media and cultural studies to ensure that we do deconstruct gender as well as sexuality for they are almost inseparable.

In the last part of this discussion, I now want to think about how the representational part of this research fits with the focus on the gendered sexual identities of my participants. What are the benefits of thinking about these two (interrelated) realms of cultural reproduction (text and the performance of gendered sexual identities) through the same research? How do my findings in these two areas when brought together speak to wider debates about queer identity and politics?

### **The limitations of queer identity debates**

De Ridder et al (2011) in a recent article about queer theory and debates around identity politics, highlight how key arguments about this topic have become polarised. As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, two key positions on the debate have emerged which hail mostly from different disciplines or at least theoretical foundations. What was once the predominant political and academic vision of sexual liberation through identity politics has been under sustained attack since the late 1990s from the queer theory (and to some extent queer political) movement. For the sake of clarity, to summarise again the well-rehearsed argument, those mostly in the humanities using the tools of deconstruction, rooted in post-structuralism, have argued that the identity politics that helped to raise the prominence of the queer community is



problematic in its tendency to reproduce notions of what it is to be 'queer'. Its reliance on an essentialising narrative, with its easy translation into popular culture - 'I was born this way' - lends itself to a persuasive argument that 'we're queer, and it's not our fault'. In that sense, this view of sexuality suggests a lack of agency in gay politics and also 'fixes' sexuality in a way that is not necessarily the experience of those for whose desires shift across the sexual spectrum. An opposing view is offered by those who highlight that it is identity politics, the creation of a more open and defined gay community (in many western countries at least ) which helped to open up the debate that we are now able to have in popular culture about queer politics. In that sense, with underlying queerphobia still in existence, a retreat from a 'loud and proud' agenda might allow a re-emergence of previous oppression. In addition, there is an argument that many queer people benefit from the community that identity politics offers, and that moving towards a fluid deconstruction position will make this more difficult to achieve.

De Ridder et al envisage this 'stand-off' through the paradigm of the politics of the norm versus the politics of representation (2011). They suggest that one of the problems in representational analysis has been that those from a deconstruction point of view have tended to focus on either finding the missing queer (Doty, 1993) or celebrating queers. Whereas those hailing from an identity politics have focused on how those from the queer community are represented. In this way, there has been a lack of attention paid to the relations between the politics of representation and the politics of norms and not enough cross methodological analysis of representations. In that way because of the dichotomised approaches around queer identity politics, we are not asking enough how we can see heteronormativity in queer representation. In terms of this research, I would suggest that there are important links between their approach and my own, in two ways. First, in terms of considering the politics of representation and what it should be addressing, and second, in thinking about where the politics of norms and representation come together.

In terms of representation this research has highlighted that, as De Ridder et al suggests, we need to analyse representations of queer through the lens of

deconstruction as well as identity politics. In doing so, we find that there are representational gains for the queer project in particular the importance of maintaining a queer presence without resorting to fixed notions of queer identity. However, we have also seen that in bringing deconstruction to the queer elements of a text we can also identify heteronormativity and homomormativity still present in the text. Moreover, and perhaps extending De Ridder et al's arguments through audience research, the politics of norms can be seen in relation to the politics of representation. For example by bringing together participants in focus groups to discuss queer representations there is a dualism where they help to analyse depictions, but in doing so also reveal some of their own identity construction, performance and (re) formation. As a result, in this project, I have been reminded of the tensions that exist between the potential for change through liberatory representations in *Torchwood* as evinced through the relative warm welcome that fluid sexual representation received in my focus groups, and the mechanics of identity (re)formation (the politics of norms) that we all face. The unfairness (discussed in chapter six) of Rich's aspirations for a long-term relationship, where he was discursively squeezed from two directions by the heteronormative desire for a long term relationship, but also the homonormative discourse that gay relationships are short lived. In that way, while I might well have identified elements of heteronormativity on my own in the text, I could well have focused only on the potential for liberation. My participants themselves, on the whole, were as optimistic as me about the vision of sexuality portrayed in the series. But by breaking down and deconstructing their contributions and gendered sexual performances what is revealed is, that identity making - despite postmodern visions of the process - must negotiate powerful oppressive discourses, the history of its own process and a need for certitude.

De Ridder et al highlight the divisions that have allowed the two camps in queer politics to become entrenched, as relating to essentialism and post-structuralism. To this I want to add a distrust of empiricism on the post-structuralist side. One that is holding back analyses which tries to bring together the politics of representation and norms, as De Ridder et al note. It would be problematic to simply say the debate is dichotomised when Butler, one of the leading post-structuralists, still believes in the

notion of the Lesbian identity. However, it does seem that ways of thinking and tools for change that exist within the two main approaches to identity, are restricted often due to their epistemological foundation. And yet it seems from my research, at least for these respondents, that what could be said to be a queer objective, the deconstruction of sexual identities, is an aspiration for the majority of them. It is the necessities of identity, such as community or psychological safety, that drive desire for more stable identity for many I interviewed, not necessarily an objection to a radical fluid view of sexuality. In this way, the two approaches are bound up together even if we deconstruct the boundaries of sexual identity.

We can say that *Torchwood* as a series that is filled with science fiction tropes, is one that is trying to offer a vision of a different kind of sexuality that is less 'fixed'. In doing so, as hopefully this research has shown, it has not only offered room for optimism and liberation in terms of the ideas it offered my participants, but it has also at the level of the process of identity formation been shown to be part of that (re)formation, at least in the way my participants began to reflect on their identities. In that way there are possibilities of change but there are varying needs and experiences and subjectivities, to account for as a part of that change. Thinking about the wider debates at hand, it would seem to be a reminder that queer theory and its mainly academic proponents, are right to say that we are moving into the period of the 'post' gay. Texts such as *Torchwood* are a TV representation of that cultural mood, but we need, in terms of thinking about how identity will change, to think about those changing it. Perhaps a more open ended 'fluid' approach to the notion of identity moving into the 'post' gay, might prove to be productive where communities of queer with different conceptions of, and needs around identity, can flourish.

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Avatar (2009) James Cameron. Twentieth Century Fox

Ashes to Ashes (2008-2010) BBC

Babylon 5 (1993-1998) Primetime Entertainment Network

Basic Instinct (1992) Paul Verhoeven. TriStar Pictures

Batman (1989) Tim Burton . Warner Brothers

Blade Runner (1982) Ridley Scott. Warner Bros.

Blakes Seven (1978-1981). BBC.

Bob and Rose (2001). BBC.

Brokeback Mountain (2005). Universal Studios. Ang Lee.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003). WB Television Network

Cagney and Lacey (1982-1988). CBS television

Casablanca (1942) Michael Curtiz. Warner Bros.

Cat's Eyes (1985-1987). ITV

Chimera (1991). ITV

Clockwork Orange (1971) Stanley Kubrick. Warner Bros.

Cloverfield (2008) Matt Reeves. Paramount Pictures

Coupling (2000-2004). BBC

Coronation Street (1964-). ITV

Cracker (1993-2006). ITV

CSI (2000). CBS

Day of the Triffids (1981). BBC

Dark City (1998) Alex Proyas. New Line Cinema

Dirty Dancing (1987) Emile Ardolino. Apollo Pictures

Dracula (1931) Tod Browning. Universal pictures



*Doctor Who* (1963-) (old and new series). BBC

Eastenders (1985-). BBC

Fight Club (1999) David Fyncher. Twentieth Century Fox

Frankenstein (1931) James Whale. Universal Pictures.

Friends (1994-2004). NBC

Gavin and Stacey (2007-). BBC.

Godzilla (1954) Roland Emmerich. Tristar Pictures.

Hollyoaks (1995-). Channel Four

Hollyoaks in the City (2006). Channel Four

Jurassic Park (1993) Steven Spielberg. Universal Pictures.

Jason and the Argonauts (1963) Don Chaffey. Columbia Pictures Corporation.

Juliet Bravo (1980-1985). BBC

I Married a Monster from Outer Space (1958) Paramount Pictures. Gene Fowler

Inception (2010) Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros.

Kath and Kim (2002-). ABC

King Kong (1933) Merien Cooper and Schoedsack. RKO Radio Pictures.

King Kong (2005) Peter Jackson. Universal Pictures

Life on Mars (2006-2007). BBC

Little Britain (2005-). BBC

Metrosexuality (1999). Channel Four

Midsommer Murders (1997-). ITV

Misfits (2009). Channel Four

Moon (2009) Duncan Jones. Sony Pictures

New Tricks (2003-). BBC

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Prime Suspect (1991-2006). ITV

Queer as Folk (1999). Channel Four

Red Dwarf (1988-2009). BBC

Sapphire and Steel (1979-1982). ITV

Saturday Night Fever (1977) John Badham. Paramount Pictures.

Sex in the City (1998-2004). HBO

Skins (2007-). Channel Four

Star Trek (1966-1969). NBC

Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith. (2005) George Lucas. Twentieth Century Fox

Stella (2012). Sky One

Silent Witness (1996-). ITV

Silver Surfer (1968). Marvel Comics

Top Gun (1986). Tony Scott. Paramount Pictures.

The Beano (1938-). DC Thompson and Co

The Fix (1997). John Dempsey. Cameron Mackintosh

The Gentle Touch (1980-1984). ITV

The Hunger (1983) Tony Scott. Metro Goldwyn Mayor.

The Man from U.N.C.L.E. (1964-1968). NBC

The Matrix Trilogy (1999-2003) Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. Warner Bros

The Producers (2005) Susan Stroman. Universal Pictures

The River of No Return (1954) Otto Preminger. Twentieth Century Fox.

The Terminator (1984) James Cameron. Orion Pictures.

The Tomorrow People (1974-1979). ITV

The Stepford Wives (1975) Bryan Forbes. Columbia Pictures.

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Thelma and Louise (1991) Ridley Scott. Metro Goldwyn Mayor.

This Life (1996-1997). BBC

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1

### Pilot Question Schedule

#### Post-screening discussion

- Please tell the group your name and what made you interested in coming along to the focus group?
- Do you watch *Torchwood* regularly?
- If so would you consider yourself a fan?
- What makes you a *Torchwood* fan as opposed to a viewer?
- What are your reasons for not watching the show?
- How have you heard about *Torchwood*?
- Have you heard about it in the media? If so what have you heard?
- How would you describe the TV series *Torchwood*, now you have watched an episode?
- What do you think are some of the themes of the show which stand out for you?
- Are there any elements of the show which are different to other prime-time TV shows? Why?
- Thinking about the representation of sexuality of the show how would you describe it?
- How would you describe the sexual identity of the characters?
- How do the characters define their own sexuality?
- What do you think about the sexuality of the show in relation to its science fiction backdrop? Are you surprised to find non-heterosexual representations in science fiction? Can you think of other sci-fi programmes with non-heterosexual representations?
- What do you think about the way men are portrayed in the show?
- What do you think about the portrayal of women in the show?

#### Sexual Identity

- How do you define yourself in terms of sexual identity, if at all?

- Has this text given you any degree of sexual liberation i.e. enables you to think differently about sexual identity or sexuality?
- Would you say that your sexual identity (or desire to avoid a sexual label) is something political for you?
- What do you think about the notion of sexual identity or defining yourself by a sexual identity such as straight or gay?
- Do you think it is more or less important to define yourself by sexuality now than it was in the past?
- Do you think the way we define our sexualities changed in society in recent years?
- What do you think about the idea of fluid sexuality or not having to define yourself as straight gay or bi?
- Would you consider yourself to be working middle or upper class? If so what makes you part of that class?

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Informed Consent Form**

#### **Polysexual Representation: The Audience, Sexual identity and British TV**

**Principal Investigator: Craig Haslop**

DPHIL Media and Cultural Studies

Postal address:

PG Pigeon Holes

Department of Media, Film and Music

Silverstone Building 222

University of Sussex

Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RG

Phone 07971 884723

E-mail [cdh22@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:cdh22@sussex.ac.uk)

web page : <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/mediastudies/profile107582.html>

**Background:**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this

study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will

involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to understand how audiences interact with open-ended representations of sexual identity on TV with a consideration of the political ramifications.

**Study Procedure:**

Your expected time commitment for this study is: up to 3 hours

Participation in the study will take the form of a focus group.

**Risks:**

The risks of this study are similar to those you experience when disclosing personal information to others. You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

**Benefits:**

There will be limited benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope that participation in the study will give some insight upon your own life and identity or other personal benefits not anticipated by the researcher. Also by participating in this study you will be helping to shape a greater understanding of how social identities relate to the contemporary media.

**Confidentiality:**

For the purposes of this research project your comments will be anonymous unless you

request that they are not. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all researcher notes and documents.
- Notes, interview transcriptions, and transcribed notes and any other identifying participant information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher. When no longer necessary for research, all materials will be destroyed.
- Information from this research will be used solely for the purpose of this study and any publications that may result from this study. Any final publication will contain the names of the public figures that have consented to participate in this study (unless a public figure participant has requested anonymity): all other participants involved in this study will not be identified and their anonymity will be maintained.
- Each participant has the opportunity to obtain a transcribed copy of their interview. However not all collected material will be transcribed.

**Person To Contact:**

Should you have any questions about the research or any related matters, please contact the

researcher at phone 07971884723 or email [cdh22@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:cdh22@sussex.ac.uk)

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part

in this study. If you do decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

If you decide to take part in this study, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without

giving a reason. You are free to not answer any question or questions if you choose.

This will not

affect the relationship you have with the researcher.

**Unforeseeable Risks:**

There may be risks that are not anticipated. However every effort will be made to minimize any

risks.

**Costs To Subject:**

There are no costs to you for your participation in this study.

**Compensation:**

There is no monetary compensation to you for your participation in this study.

**Consent:**

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understood the information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Anonymity

☐

Not Anonymity





Name (in capital letters)

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Torchwood* Research Focus Group**

**Thanks for attending!**

### **Agenda**

- **Introduction**
- **Screening**
- **Prompted Discussion**

### **Background**

Launched in 2003 on BBC 3 (then later aired on BBC1), *Torchwood* is a spin-off TV series from the recently revitalised BBC TV series *Doctor Who*. The series charts the adventures of Captain Jack Harkness, a character originally from the revitalised *Doctor Who* series, and his colleagues, who are all part of the *Torchwood* institute. The *Torchwood* Institute is a Government backed agency which investigates alien appearances/encounters on earth. In the following episode an old colleague of

Captain Jack's from his time travelling agency days, Captain John Hart, finds Captain Jack and his colleagues and starts to cause problems for the team.

Before the start of the session I would be grateful if you could answer the following questions:

How if at all would you define your sexual identity?

---

How would you define your class if at all?

Working

Middle

Upper

None

Other.....

What is your occupation?

---

### APPENDIX 3 – FACEBOOK MESSAGE

#### **To label or not to label? Research regarding the potential of open ended sexual representation on British TV - call for participants**

I am conducting research at the University of Sussex in the Media and film and music department investigating the potential of open-ended sexual representation on British television - that is representation of sexuality without labelling. As part of this I am looking for volunteers to give just 1 and 1/2 hours of their time to attend a screening of the

BBC TV series *Torchwood* and a follow up discussion of 45 minutes. All research will be treated in complete confidence and results used will be anonymous.

The focus groups will take place in Central London on the Tuesday the 7th and Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2011 at the Drill Hall starting at 6.45pm at the Drill Hall , 16 Chenies Street, London WC1E 7EX near Tottenham Court Road tube. If you think you can help

please get back to me at [cdh22@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:cdh22@sussex.ac.uk) with the date you can make and whether you're employed and if so what your occupation is.

Please pass on to friends and colleagues who you think might be interested. I am looking for people from a variety of backgrounds.

Thanks in advance

Craig Haslop

Doctoral Researcher, Media and Cultural Studies

University of Sussex

**APPENDIX 4 - OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS ANONYMISED**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Class</b>
<b>Group 1 London</b>					
Louise	Research fellow	Female	Straight	London	none
Rich	Media consultant	Male	Queer/lesbian	London	working
Roseanne	Lecturer	Female	No label	London	middle
Sally	PR Consultant	Female	Straight	London	middle
Damien	Marketing	Male	Gay	london	middle
Debbie	Academic	Male	Queer/lesbian	London	None
<b>Group 2 London</b>					
Nick		Male	Gay	London	middle
Maria	Librarian	Female	Straight	London	middle
Jen	Editor	Female	Straight	London	middle
Mandy	Part time student	Female	queer	London	none
Greg	Unknown	Male	queer	london	Working/middle
Danny	Prison teacher	Male	Straight	london	working
Susan	Library assistant	Female	Straight	london	working
<b>Group 1 Brighton</b>					
Rose	Office Manager	Female	Straight	Brighton	middle
Julie	Brighton Uni	Female	Queer	Brighton	middle
Robert	counsellor	Male	Straight	Brighton	middle
Chris	Student	Male	Gay	brighton	middle
<b>Group 2 Brighton</b>					
Shane	Head teacher	Male	Gay	Brighton	middle
Rich	Counsellor	Male	Gay	Brighton	middle
Harry	Lecturer	Male	Gay	Brighton	middle
Ben	Travel marketeer	Male	Straight	Brighton	middle
Jenny	Sales Assistant	Female	Straight	Brighton	middle
Sue	Student	Female	Straight	Brighton	middle

**Pilot group - Based at University of  
Sussex**

Gordon	Phd researcher	Male	Straight	Brighton	middle
Louise	Admin assistant	Female	Straight	Brighton	middle
Rosie	Phd researcher	Female	Straight	Brighton	middle
Geri	Phd researcher	Femae	Straight	Brighton	middle
Nigel	Phd researcher	Male	Queer	Brighton	middle
Gillian	Phd researcher	Female	Queer	Brighton	middle

## APPENDIX 5

Image 1



Source: <http://www.radiotimes.com/shows/torchwood/main.jpg>

Imagery used by the Radio Times to advertise *Torchwood* which includes the characters from Series 1 and 2. It exhibits the man/woman/man/woman/man gender pattern.

Image 2



Source: <http://www.madblackcat.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/torchwood-threeshot18.jpg>

This is a promotional image for the third series of *Torchwood* which highlights the characters in series 3 'Children of Earth'. It uses the same image but cut down and still adheres to the man/woman/man gender pattern.

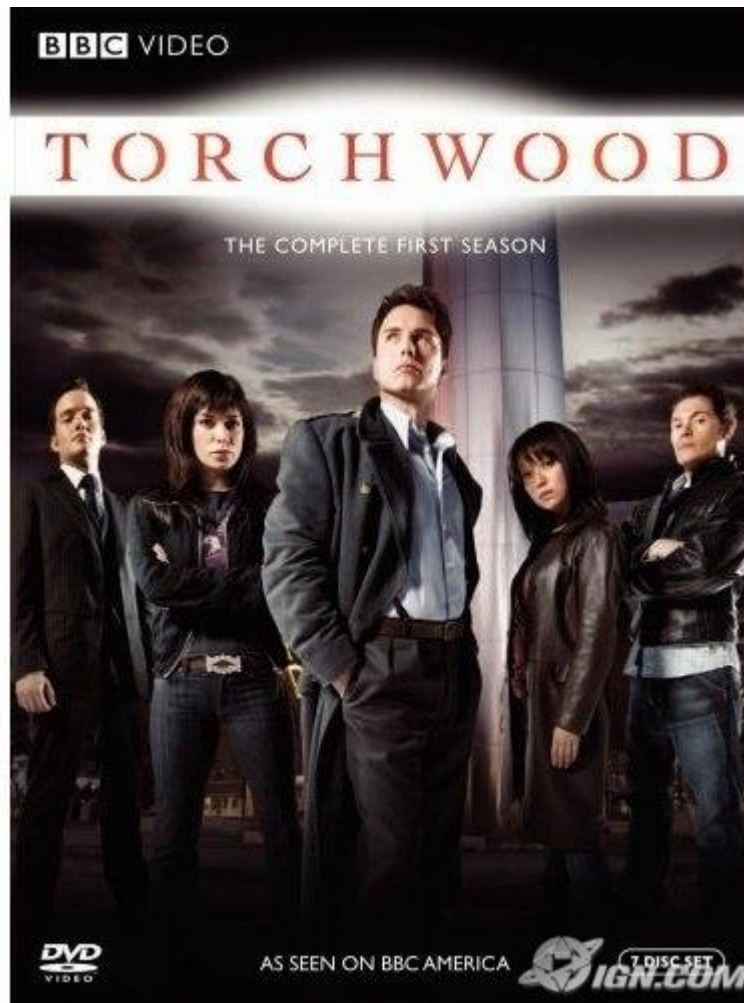
**Image 3**



Source: <http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/pictures/2009/7/10/1247242022087/Torchwood-001.jpg>

The above image is further promotional material used for series 3 'Children of Earth' used by the Guardian newspaper. It again adheres to the man/woman/man gender pattern.

**Image 4**



Source: <http://dvdmedia.ign.com/dvd/image/article/847/847904/torchwood-the-complete-first-series-20080125070734453-000.jpg>

This imagery is taken from the cover of the *Torchwood* DVD set and further reiterates the trope of gender patterning in *Torchwood*.



Image 5



Source: [http://www.moloth.com/pics/tv%20-%20movies/Dr%20Who%20-%20Torchwood/torchwood\\_group02b.jpg](http://www.moloth.com/pics/tv%20-%20movies/Dr%20Who%20-%20Torchwood/torchwood_group02b.jpg)

It should be noted that there a few exceptions to the gender patterning as seen in the above shot used for the promotion of the start of series 1. However in a Google image search only 3 of 12 images selected deviated from the man/woman/man pattern used in my most promotional shots.